

CHAPTER 1

Learning to Read: The Importance of Words

When we open the Bible, or any text for that matter, we seldom question how we define the words we find on the printed page. We assume that the words we read, defined by our cultural ethos, have universal meaning within that society. Yet, at a very basic level, words are linguistic signs that point to something other than themselves, something that conveys meaning. Signs as words do not link a name to a thing; rather they link a concept to an image. These signs, constructed by humans, tell us who we are, define others, and reveal how we relate to each other, the overall society, and the Deity. When we read a word, we envision an image, created by society, that is then connected to the linguistic sign. Signs, whether they be words, colors, or objects, represent meanings that go beyond the confines of the sign itself. For example, let's say we are driving down the street and we notice three circles, each with a different color, one circle on top of the other. Say the top circle is red, the middle circle is yellow, and the bottom circle is green. What do you do when you see the red circle lit up? You stop. Society has taught us to stop on "red." What do you do when you see the green circle lit up? You go. What do you do when you see the yellow circle lit up? Do you speed up before it changes to the red circle?

These colors, like words, are signs pointing to an image or concept constructed by society. The red light does not exist to make you ponder redness. The red light has a meaning given to it by society: stop. Yet, the choice of linking the sign "red" with the concept "stop" was an arbitrary choice made by the person with the power to invent the traffic light. There is no intrinsic stop-ness

quality to the color red. The first traffic light could easily have used the color purple to mean stop. Regardless, now, as a society, when we see red as a sign, our immediate reaction is to stop, an action we do without much thought. The linkage of the sign "red" with the concept "stop" becomes legitimized in our mind, so that even to suggest to drivers a different concept for red becomes abnormal. Words, like colors, are signs signifying a concept that has become normative within a given society.

DEFINING TERMS

When we do not know the meaning of a word, we turn to the dictionary, which serves as an objective source. We seldom question the dictionary's validity, nor do we challenge how a term is defined by our society. We simply assume the definition given is true and reliable. Yet the dictionary, far from being objective, is in fact subjective. Because words are linguistic signs, the only thing we can expect to learn from the dictionary is the concept that society has historically linked or is presently linking to that particular word. Hence, the definition of the word at times masks the biases of a given society, biases that remain linked to the word as sign.

Let's consider an example by looking up the word "black." According to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, the definitions for black include: soiled, as from soot; dirty; evil; wicked; cheerless and depressing; gloomy; being or characterized by morbid or grimly satiric humor; marked by anger or sullenness; attended with disaster; calamitous; deserving of, indicating, or incurring censure or dishonor. The *Webster's New World College Dictionary* provides a few more nuances, specifically: harmful; disgraceful; full of sorrow or suffering; sad; dismal; disastrous; without hope. *Roget's Super Thesaurus* lists a few additional synonyms: diabolical; satanic; nefarious.

Let us now compare these definitions with the word "white." The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* links the word "white" with: unsullied; pure. According to the *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, "white" also means: morally or spiritually pure; spotless; innocent; free from evil intent; harmless; honest; honorable; fair; decent. *Roget's Super Thesaurus* contrasts "white" as the antonym for "black" and defines it as: sunny; bright;

illuminated; cheerful; hopeful; auspicious; favorable; good; angelic; saintly.

In short, our culture has linked the word and color “black” with negative definitions and “white” with positive definitions. This is evident in the old TV westerns where the good guys were distinguished from the bad by the color of their hats. These definitions given to the words “black” and “white” reveal our culture’s attitudes toward these colors—attitudes formed within a society that has historically used color to define one’s place in the overall community. The lighter the skin pigmentation, the greater the availability of opportunities. By defining “black” and “white” in this fashion, the purity of whiteness and the wickedness of blackness are transferred to the society at large. Rather than confess that the inequalities of society are due to racist social structures, religion (as well as other communal networks) provides the psychological reassurance of legitimacy; in other words, it confirms that the wealth, power, and privilege amassed by the members of the dominant culture are theirs by right. When whites compare their social status with the less privileged space of nonwhites, they fail to merely be content with their success. They desire “the right to their happiness.”¹

In the minds of those within the dominant culture, people on the margins are predominantly poor and disenfranchised not as a direct result of the Euroamericans’ privileged space but because of the character flaws of nonwhites, flaws that are reinforced by how the terms “white” and “black” are defined. The plight of the poor, trapped in the ghettos and *barrios* of this wealthy nation, is due to the inferiority associated with their darker skin pigmentation. The victims of poverty are blamed for their own social location; this exonerates the privileged, whose secured social space is dependent upon maintaining a reserve army of undereducated, underskilled laborers. Blackness becomes the color of all that is wrong with America: laziness, poverty, the welfare state, and sin.

Is it any wonder then that when a black man approaches our car, we quickly lock the doors? Or when a black man walks by us, we clutch our purses and hold them closer to our body? After all, by definition a wicked, evil, dirty, satanic man is approaching, and hence our safety and possessions are threatened. Have you noticed that we never refer to a poor person of color as “black trash”

because, by definition, using the words “black” and “trash” together is redundant? Yet we refer to poor whites as “white trash” because “white,” by definition, is pure and spotless; hence the phrase discloses the internal incongruence of the term. Because the words “black” and “white” as signs are arbitrarily linked to concepts constructed by a society that conveys its biases, we shouldn’t be surprised that this particular nation, steeped in racism since its foundation, would link negative connotations to the word “black” and positive connotations to the word “white.”

In the spring of 1997, actor Desi Arnaz Giles received numerous death threats for his starring role in a play based on the life of Jesus Christ. *The Passion Play*, focusing on the final days of Christ’s earthly life, is performed annually and has historically attracted bus groups from the northern New Jersey region. The controversy began after the first performance, when the audience discovered that Giles was black. As word spread, several of these groups canceled.² Why the uproar? If “black” is defined as evil, wicked, and diabolical, it would be blasphemy to define Jesus, who is pure and spotless, as black. Jesus can be no color but white. A portrait of a Christ who is black becomes offensive because it contradicts the definition our culture has assigned, normalized, and legitimized for the word “black.”

IMPOSING TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY MEANINGS ON ANCIENT TEXTS

What happens when we read the biblical text with eyes formed in the twenty-first century? Do we read into the words found in the ancient biblical text the meanings our present culture has taught us? Consider the example found in Numbers 12. The text states the following:

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had taken for a wife. For he had taken a Cushite woman. They said, “Has Yahweh spoken only to Moses? Has he not also spoken to us?” And Yahweh heard. Now, the man Moses was very meek, more than any man on the face of the earth. . . . And the anger of Yahweh glowed against them, and he left. . . . And behold, Miriam

was leprous, white as snow. And Aaron turned toward Miriam and behold, she was a leper. Aaron said to Moses, “Oh my lord I beg you, do not lay upon us this sin which we foolishly committed and are guilty of.” (1–3, 9, 10–11)

The story is about Moses marrying a black woman, placing his family in an awkward situation. The Cushites were a black ethnic group. According to the text, Moses’ marriage upset his brother Aaron and his sister Miriam. They were so upset that they chose to confront him. They challenged Moses by saying, “Has God spoken only to Moses? Has he not spoken to us?” All three of them then appeared before God, who was surprisingly upset with Moses’ family. The Bible says that God was so mad that he inflicted Miriam with leprosy, turning her skin “white as snow.” God punished Miriam by making her white! Note: Why didn’t God also punish Aaron for speaking out against Moses? Why is the woman punished and the male spared? Regardless, God relented after her brothers pleaded for mercy.

We read the words found in this story and impose upon those words the meaning our culture has assigned to them, a linkage that includes our twenty-first-century cultural biases. Because racism is so ingrained within U.S. society, we simply assume that Aaron and Miriam were upset because Moses married downward. If a present-day white family member was to marry a person of color, more than likely the family would be concerned about the relationship. Their biases are usually masked by the advice “Think about the children and how they will suffer.” We read these biases into the biblical story and conclude that Moses’ siblings were upset because a black woman had become part of the family. Yet a closer reading of the text reveals that it was not Moses who married downward.

We first need to ask which people were politically superior in the region. The answer, Africans (specifically Egyptians). African blacks were the ones in positions of power during Moses’ lifetime. Hence, to marry a black person was to marry upward. The concern Aaron and Miriam expressed was that because Moses married upward, he might “put on airs.” This is why they ask if he thinks that God can only talk to him. This also explains why the text reassures the reader that “Moses was very meek, more than any man on the face of the earth” (v. 3).

Yet race may not be the reason why Moses was marrying upward. Nowhere in the Bible does it tell us that Moses’ skin was white. Why then do we assume it was? At this time in world history, there were no major concentrations of Europeans in this area of the world. The Cushite woman may have been marrying down not because of race but because of the socioeconomic position of the Hebrews, a non-nation of people roaming through a desert. Yet, in spite of these sociohistorical facts, the dominant cultures read the texts from within their particular social location, imposing on the interpretation subconscious biases.

How else have we “colored” the Scriptures? According to the Bible, what color were Adam and Eve? Saul, David, or Solomon? The prophets? Jesus? If the Bible does not tell us their color, why do we think of them and depict them on church walls and books as being white Europeans? One of my students once asked, “Where do blacks come from?” After all, if Adam and Eve were the first two humans, how can we explain the development of the black race? In her mind, Adam and Eve, created in the image of God, had to be white. Regardless of her assumptions, I asked her what God used to create Adam. She replied the soil, a reference to Genesis 2:7, where God forms man out of the ground’s soil and then breathes life into him. I asked what color is the richest and most fertile soil. She answered black. I then asked if she had ever heard of white soil. She shook her head no. Why then do we assume Adam was white? If God chose the best soil for God’s ultimate creation, wouldn’t the skin of that creation resemble the ingredient used? Maybe her question should have been, “Where do whites come from?”

Although the biblical text fails to reveal the color of Adam and Eve, leaving us to assume their skin pigmentation, the Bible does record the presence of Africans. For example, in Genesis 10:8–12, the founder of civilization in Mesopotamia, Nimrod, is called the son of Cush, Cush being the most commonly used term in the biblical text to designate a person’s black color. The term “Cush” was the name given by the Egyptians to the people living south of them. The Hebrews picked up this term and used it to refer to the people from the interior regions of Africa. When the Hebrew biblical text was translated into Greek (the Septuagint), the most frequent translation for “Cush” was “Aithiops,” which literally meant “burnt-face.” Although “Aithiops” is translated into the English

word “Ethiopian” (not to be confused with modern-day Ethiopia), the term was also used to refer to Africans of dark skin pigmentation with African physical features (wide nose, hair texture, and so on).

In the Hebrew Bible, Cush was also used to refer to the Egyptians. In short, Cush (Ethiopia), Nubia, Put (Phut), and Egypt were not always distinct geographic entities, but can be understood as referring essentially to the ancestors of the same people group, Africans. By defining the terms that reveal the presence of Africans in the Bible, we quickly discover their major contributions. Besides Nimrod and Moses’ Cushite wife, we also discover that the prophet Zephaniah is the son of Cush. The Hebrew word *Phinehas*, a derivative from the Egyptian word *Pa-Neshsi*, means “Nubian” or “Negro.” Phinehas is also the proper name of Aaron’s grandson (Moses’ grandnephew), the high priest Eli’s son (during the prophet Samuel’s youth), and numerous Jews in post-exilic times. Why call a child Negro if he or she was not black? Other biblical characters who most certainly were African were Hagar, Abraham’s maid-wife (Gen. 16), Jeremiah’s benefactor Ebedmelech (Jer. 38–39), Tirhakah the Ethiopian king (Isa. 37:9), the Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10), Simon of Cyrene (Matt. 27:32), and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8).³

DEFINING RACISM

So far, we have focused on the words “black” and “white.” Yet another linguistic sign needs to be defined before we can move forward. This word is “racism,” and, like black and white, it also is defined by the dominant culture in order to disavow any personal biases or obligation toward societal racist structures. *Webster’s Encyclopedic Dictionary* defines racism as “the *belief* that certain races, especially one’s own, are inherently superior to others” (italic mine). Now, most people, when asked if they believe in the supremacy of their own race, would normally answer no. With the exception of white supremacy groups like the Ku Klux Klan, Arian Nation, neo-Nazis, or the Church of the Creator, few people today believe or are willing to admit a belief in their race’s superiority. Most would agree, at least publicly, that race does not determine intellectual or any other kind of supremacy. Hence, if no belief of superiority exists, then by definition no racism exists. This is because

our society has linked the word “racism” with the concept of expressing a belief. If any traces are to be found, it is either a lingering pre-civil-rights bias or a present-day product of ignorance.

For purposes of this book, racism will be defined not solely as a belief but rather as actions committed individually or communally. Most scholars recognize the three united prongs of racism: prejudices (beliefs), power structures, and societal norms. Such a definition asserts that while a person may not hold a *belief* in racial superiority, she or he still contributes to racism by complicity with the present power structures designed to protect power and privilege in certain geographical locations. The mere fact that a Hispanic’s skin coloration may be lighter than other Latino/as assures greater success in this country over against Hispanics who display more pronounced Amerindian, African, or Asian features.

For example, during the 1980s, as a young, light-skinned Cuban, I was pulled over by the New Jersey highway patrol and searched because I was a Latino with long hair wearing a bandana and driving a fairly new red sports car. When pulled over, I asked the officer what was wrong. He answered that I was traveling five miles above the speed limit. After checking my driver’s license, registration form, and insurance policy, he asked if he could also search my car and my person. Common procedure for speeders? I think not. So I asked why. His response: sport cars driven by Latinos with Dade County license plates were suspected of importing cocaine to New York City. Before racial profiling ever made the headlines, I knew what it meant to be a suspect because I committed the crime of driving a nice car while being Hispanic.

Yet, by the same token, I confess that I need not worry about being pulled over while driving in Dade County. Why? Of all cities in the United States, Miami is the only municipality where first-generation Latin American immigrants have become dominant in city politics. By the 1990s, the majority of city commissioners were exilic Cubans, as was the mayor. The superintendent of Dade County public schools, the state chairs of the Florida Democratic Party, and the local chairs of the county’s political parties were exilic Cubans. Also, the presidents of about twenty banks, Florida International University, the Dade County AFL-CIO, the Miami Chamber of Commerce, the Miami Herald Publishing Company, and the Greater Miami Board of Realtors (a post I once held) were

exilic Cuban. It is common to find exilic Cubans occupying top administrative posts in City Hall, *The Miami Herald*, and the city's corporate boardrooms. Cubans wield tremendous power in the political, social, economic, and cultural spheres of Miami. Because exilic Cubans surmounted the social structures of oppression, I am the racist or the oppressor when in Miami and the victim of racism or oppression when I leave.

Remember that racism is more than just personal prejudices or biases; it is the product of social structures designed to privilege one group over another. Even though my prejudices and biases remain the same, when in Miami I am the one who benefits from the social structures, hence the racist. Yet when I leave Miami and drive on the New Jersey Turnpike, I am the victim of racism. What changed? Not my biases or prejudices; rather, my social location. Although personal biases or prejudices are not virtues to be emulated, they do not fully constitute racism: social structures do.

This is why, when people of color point out Euroamerica's racism, they are referring to something that goes beyond mere bias or prejudice. White privilege makes all whites racist not because of their possible beliefs of superiority but because they benefit from the present social structures; in the same way, I must confess my racism when in Miami because those structures are designed to benefit me. This does not make all whites evil, wicked people; it simply reveals who benefits in society because of race. It must be remembered that this was not always the case. After all, blond-haired and blue-eyed white Gauls were sold as slaves in the marketplaces of Rome during imperial times, and white Europeans served as slaves to Moorish and Ottoman overlords. Racism depends on which group controls power and uses that power, at the expense of others, to provide privilege for one group. In this country, at this time in world history, the face of racism happens to be white.

In the same way, I must confess that I am a sexist, even though I consider myself a feminist. Because of my gender, I must realize and confess my complicity with sexist social structures, a complicity motivated by personal advantage.⁴ When competing with a woman for a job, I hold the advantage of being hired, and at a higher salary, solely because I am male. It does not matter that my personal beliefs are that men and women are and should be treat-

ed as equals; the social structures exist to provide me with privilege due to my gender. All things being equal, I prevail over women in the marketplace, in the church community, and in society at large because I am male. I need not hold racist or sexist beliefs; my complicity with social structures protects the privilege that comes with whiteness and maleness.

Racism, as well as sexism, becomes normalized within a society through its customs, language, traditions, myths, regulations, and laws. Those who benefit from racist structures usually do not recognize their existence, making complicity effortless. In fact, racism has become so ingrained in our subconscious that we can actually measure our physical reactions to other races. In a 1998 study conducted at Purdue University, researchers examined the physiological response to an encounter and a physical contact with an unfamiliar person. Fifty-three African American (23 males and 30 females) and fifty-one Euroamerican (23 males and 28 females) undergraduates participated in the study. By measuring facial muscle activity, increased skin conductance, and heart rate acceleration, the study was able to investigate the automatic and expressive effects of an initial greeting and touch from an unfamiliar person. The subjects were met by a female research assistant of the same race who oriented them to the laboratory and attached sensors to them. The research assistant left the room, only to have an unfamiliar interactor enter moments later. The interactor was of the same sex as the subject but varied in racial composition, with half of the subjects encountering a white person and the other half encountering a black person. After a few moments of introducing themselves and checking the equipment, the interactor asked to take the subject's pulse rate.

The results of the experiment showed that when the interactor was of a different race, the subject's heart rate accelerated, skin conductance increased, and facial muscles tightened; in other words, the subject showed internal physical manifestations of stress. These levels were significantly higher when the interactor was a black man (especially among white male subjects).⁵ The study seems to indicate that even when we profess to be "color-blind," white bodies physically react when touched by black bodies. Politically correct rhetoric aside, race is deeply ingrained in how we have been taught to see others.

We cannot, however, speak about race as a meaningful criterion within the biological sciences because every reputable biologist understands that race as a scientific category is unsupportable. The human genetic variability between the populations of Africa or Asia or Europe or Latin America is not significantly greater than the differences existing within those ethnic populations. Race is not a scientific notion; it is a sociohistorical concept. Race is not a biological factor differentiating humans; rather, it is a social construction whose function is the oppression of one group of people for the benefit of another. With the exception of skin color and physical difference (hair texture, eye and nose size, and so on), racial character differences do not exist. Rather, race is a sign that signifies who has power and privilege within a given society.

Yet, if race is a social construction, can persons find themselves occupying more than one race? Throughout my life, the Latino/a community where I was raised reinforced the notion that I was “white.” Thus, when I gazed into the mirror, I was taught to see a white middle-class Hispanic man. I then left my Latina/o neighborhood in Miami and moved to Louisville, Kentucky, where I eventually took a job teaching Spanish at a local college. I decided to test my students on their ability to pronounce colors in Spanish by pointing at an item and asking the students, ¿Qué color es esto? (“What color is this?”). After pointing to several items throughout the room and soliciting numerous different responses, I realized I had yet to ask a question where the answer would be *Blanco* (“White”). Not finding anything white in the room, I pointed to my skin and asked, “What color is this?” To my surprise, the class in unison responded, *Moreno* (“Brown”). At that moment I realized the dominant culture saw me as brown while I saw myself as white. Regardless of my skin pigmentation, the dominant culture classifies me as nonwhite because I speak Spanish. Without knowing it, I became a “cross-dresser” between two different constructions of race. While in Miami, exilic Cubans as a whole see themselves as being white, not realizing that to the dominant culture we are brown.

THE FACTOR OF LANGUAGE

The 1950s television star Desi Arnaz, best known as Ricky Ricardo in the sitcom *I Love Lucy*, had a sign posted on his dressing

door: “English is broken here.” This spoken broken English became a unifying source among Hispanics, regardless of national origin. Yet, a presumption exists that all Latino/as are able to speak Spanish. In reality, some speak English, others Spanish, some are bilingual, while still others speak Spanglish. Now, if reading and interpreting the Bible in English becomes complicated because of meanings imposed upon the ancient text that reflect twenty-first-century biases, what happens when we read the text in another language? Those who read the Bible in Spanish discover a text that provides theological interpretations different from those who read the same passages in English. To read the Bible in Spanish is to find different ways of understanding the Scriptures, ways that expand and challenge the normative interpretations of the dominant culture.

For example, the English word “love” usually characterizes how we feel toward diverse objects, persons, and experiences. I love my wife, I love ice cream, I love my children, or I love baseball—these are phrases any one of us would use to describe something or someone who gives us joy. In reality, I do not love baseball with the same intensity or passion as the love I express for my wife. Yet, because we use the same word to describe these different levels of affections, the word “love” loses its intimacy and significance. The Spanish language provides a distinction. *Te amo* (“I love you”) is reserved only for spouses or lovers. *Te quiero* (literally, “I want you”) is used to connote love toward family and friends. *Me gusta* (“I like it”) usually refers to baseball, ice cream, and other things or experiences we like. Which Spanish word do you think is used for the word love when referring to God? The more intimate term, *Te amo*, is used. To read of the love of God is to read about the intimate relationship between lovers.

The English word “you,” which can be translated into Spanish as either *tú* or *usted*, also reveals how we understand God when we read the Bible in Spanish. *Usted* is a formal pronoun used when addressing those who occupy a higher station in life. When speaking to my employer, a political or community leader, or my mentor/teacher, I show my respect by addressing them as *usted*. On the other hand, *tú* is an informal pronoun used among equals or for those who occupy lower social standing. Friends, coworkers, children, or employees are usually referred to as *tú*. Which Spanish pronoun do you think is used when referring to God? The

informal *tú* is used, not the formal *usted*. By calling God *tú*, God is recognized as one who is in solidarity with the station of life of U.S. Hispanics.⁶ God too is from the margins.

A HAN READING

When those who are disenfranchised suffer unbearable injustices, they develop an inexpressible feeling in the pit of their stomachs. The Korean community has a name for this pang. They call it *han*.⁷ *Han* encompasses the feelings of resentment, helplessness, bitterness, sorrow, and revenge that are felt deep in the victim's guts. *Han* becomes the daily companion of the powerless, the voiceless, the marginalized. *Han*, however, is not restricted to the individual. When social injustices prevail throughout the whole community for several generations without an avenue of release or cleansing, a collective *han* (collective unconsciousness) develops. For many who are Asians, or of Asian descent, life in this country is a *han*-ridden experience. Yet, it is from the *han*-ridden margins that the dominant culture finds its salvation.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is recounted by Jesus in Luke 10:25–37. Jesus is responding to a member of the dominant culture, a promising lawyer, who is asking what he must do to inherit eternal life, salvation. Jesus narrates the story of a man who is on his way to Jericho from Jerusalem. Suddenly, he finds himself in the hands of brigands. Beaten and robbed, he is left for dead. Shortly afterward, a priest who is traveling on the same road sees the wounded man but crosses the street to avoid him. Minutes later, another holy man from the dominant culture, a Levite, comes across the wounded man, but he too crosses the street and avoids him. Eventually, a member from the margins of society, a Samaritan, a person of color, sees the wounded man, has compassion, and ministers to him. He bandages his wounds by pouring oil and wine on them. Then the Samaritan carries the wounded man to a nearby inn and pays out of his pocket for the man to be looked after.

The Samaritan lived a life of *han*. Although the wounded man was a member of the dominant culture responsible for the Samaritan's oppression, the Samaritan was able to take pity because he had *han* inside himself. The ability to recognize *han* initiates a healing where the wounded are able to heal the wounds of others. One who suf-

fers unbearable pain is able to understand and pour refreshing "oil and wine" on the others' wounds. Hence the importance of support groups, where people struggling with the same pain come together to help each other in the healing process. By picking the Samaritan outcast to be the catalyst for healing and salvation, instead of other members of the dominant culture, Jesus calls the *han*-ridden communities located on the margins of society to be the agents of healing for a *han*-ridden world.⁸ Those who are suffering *han* should not look to the priest and ministers for help unless they too have experienced *han*.

MULTIPLE CONSCIOUSNESS

If a biblical text can be read and interpreted in several different ways, which interpretation is correct? The challenge faced by those who read the Bible from the margins is that the dominant culture has the power to shape and legitimize the religious discourse. The interpretations of the disenfranchised can easily be dismissed as interesting perspectives that may add some "color" to understanding the Bible, but in the minds of the dominant culture, these interpretations are deemed lacking in scholastic rigor and without any universal relevance. Yet, violence is done to the biblical text when we reduce the interpretations that come from the margins into interesting perspectives among the multitude of possible perspectives, each equal in value and importance. Reading the Bible from the social location of oppression does not call for the treatment of all biblical interpretations as equals, where the interpretation from the margins is but one competing perspective. Rather, an affirmation and an option are made for the interpretations of the disenfranchised, taking priority over the interpretations of those who still benefit from societal structures of oppression.

At first glance, it may appear somewhat arrogant to claim the superiority of one interpretation over another. Why should the interpretations that are formed in the margins of society take precedence over the interpretations voiced by the dominant culture? Is it because the disenfranchised are holier? Smarter? Closer to God? No, of course not. The reason an interpretational privilege exists for the disenfranchised is that such an interpretation is based on a concept known as the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed.

This term basically means that those who are disenfranchised are in a position to understand the biblical text better because they know what it means to be a marginalized person attempting to survive within a social context designed to benefit others at their expense.

In W. E. B. Du Bois's monumental book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, he introduces the reader to the concept of double consciousness, a concept that describes the experience African Americans endure when they are pressured to forsake their self-consciousness. African Americans (and I would add all marginalized people) are forced to see themselves as the white world sees them. This leads to the disenfranchised defining themselves through the eyes of the dominant culture via common stereotypes imposed upon them.⁹ When they begin to read the biblical text, they look toward the dominant culture to set the standards by which the text is normatively read and interpreted. At times, these interpretations are responsible for the maintenance of very oppressive social structures that keep them at the margins of society.

Although Du Bois writes about double consciousness, we can expand his work to include triple consciousness or even quadruple consciousness. If a black woman sees herself through the eyes of a white-dominated and male-dominated world, can her self-definition be understood as triple-consciousness? What if she is a black Latina woman? Does this constitute quadruple consciousness? As a Latino male, I know what it is to be a victim of ethnic discrimination, but as a male, I also know what it means to be the beneficiary of sexist structures. Likewise, because I have a lighter skin pigmentation and lack pronounced African or Amerindian features, I also benefit, to some degree, in a social structure that privileges those closest to the white ideal. I am both victim and victimizer. Our culture's present structures of oppression go beyond a black-white dichotomy. Oppressive social structures are fluid, creating different levels and severities of oppression. Rather than enter into a discussion as to who is more oppressed, it will be more productive to view oppressive social structures as a web that can work to our detriment or advantage, depending on our social location.

When I see myself the way the dominant culture sees me, I attempt to live up to its constructed stereotype of me. For exam-

ple, as a poor preteen Latino living in New York City, I knew from a young age that I was different from the Euroamerican kids in my school and neighborhood. No matter how hard my parents tried to protect me from our poverty, they were unsuccessful. All I had to do was compare my life with the so-called typical family on the television show *Leave It to Beaver* to know that I was not normal. The images on the small screen were not my experience or reality, so something had to be wrong with me and my people. How else could I explain our poverty? Television and movies created a definition for me of what a Latino male is. Bombarded with media images of knife-wielding, oversexed, undereducated gang members, I attempted to live up to this image, obtaining and carrying a switchblade at the age of twelve and accepting poor grades as an inherited character flaw that came with being Hispanic. I saw myself the way Euroamericans saw me. I would pray that God would grant me blond hair and blue eyes. I even tried changing my name to Mike. With time, I looked toward the dominant Euroamerican culture in order to establish the standards for perfection in my own life. As to my own Hispanic roots, I viewed them with disdain, defining them in the same way that the dominant culture saw them. By seeing myself through the eyes of the dominant culture, I developed false consciousness, that is, a false way of self-perception, a way that was established early in my childhood.

A famous study conducted in 1984 to test racial self-identification illustrates the effects upon people of color who learn, as children, to see themselves through the eyes of the dominant culture. Thirty-five black males and twenty-three black females, ages four through six, were given two infant dolls, identical in every way except for skin color. One doll was white, the other was black. The children were asked which doll looked nice, which looked bad. Not surprisingly, the children preferred the white dolls, with boys more likely than girls wanting to identify with the white doll. The study concluded that because of the socioeconomic disadvantages associated with blackness, children were less willing to identify with that race.¹⁰ From an early age, external social structures taught them that white is better. If double or multiple consciousness imposes upon people of color a self-image that is defined by the dominant culture, then how can they be liberated from this false consciousness?

The first act toward any form of liberation from oppressive structures is to see oneself through one's own eyes and define oneself through one's own terms. Rejecting how the dominant culture sees and defines people of color becomes in itself a consciousness-raising activity that allows those who are marginalized to define themselves apart from the negative stereotypes usually imposed. Learning to read the Bible from one's social location can become an integral part of this liberating process. Reading biblical texts from the underside of the U.S. culture empowers disenfranchised communities. Within the pages of the Bible, the marginalized discover a God who sides with those who are oppressed, actively leading them toward a promised land.

It would be erroneous to assume that the biblical interpretations arising from the margins of society are solely for the consumption of people of color. Because of the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed, marginalized groups are in a better position to interpret the Bible than the dominant culture. But biblical interpretations that are developed from the margins contain truths that are not restricted solely to the disenfranchised. Within these interpretations the dominant culture can also discover liberation and salvation, because the oppressors, like those oppressed, are locked into a societal structure that prevents both sides from becoming all that God has intended creation to be: saved and liberated.

Why then are the biblical interpretations of the disenfranchised so important in fully understanding the Scriptures? It is because people of color know what it means to live in a Eurocentric society where their very survival requires them to learn how to navigate laws, customs, traditions, and idiosyncracies designed to protect the power and privilege of the dominant culture. Although people of color know what it means to be marginalized within a Euroamerican culture, those with power and privilege have no conception of what it means to belong to a disenfranchised group. In fact, most Euroamericans can achieve success without having to know anything about, or associate with, people on the margins. The same cannot be said if the roles were reversed. Because those who are marginalized know how to exist in both their world and the world where they lack a voice, they can bring an expanded and raised consciousness to the reading of the Bible.

THE CENTER-MARGIN DICHOTOMY

As the disenfranchised read the Bible from the margins, that is, from their social location, their empowering interpretation unmasks and critiques oppressive structures. Reading the Bible from the margins implies that at times the Bible is read *to* the center. Often in fact, the text is read from the social location of those who occupy the center of society, those with power and privilege. Hence, the Bible is read from the center toward the margins in order to teach those who are less fortunate what they must do to occupy privileged space. Yet Jesus's audience was primarily the outcasts of society. This is why it is important to understand the message of Jesus from the perspective of the disenfranchised. The marginalized of Jesus' time occupied the privileged position of being the first to hear and respond to the gospel. By making the disenfranchised recipients of the Good News, Jesus added a political edge to his message.

Jesus used parables that resonated with the lives of the poor, the tax collectors, the prostitutes—in short, the marginalized. God's self-revelation to humanity does not occur from the centers of world power but in the margins of society. It is not from the court of Pharaoh that God's laws are revealed to humanity but from their slaves. Nor does the incarnation occur in the imperial palace of Caesar, or to the household of the high priest in Jerusalem. Rather, God is made flesh among the impure Galileans, impure because they were seen by the center as half-breeds, from a territory peopled by Arabs, Greeks, Asians, Phoenicians, Syrians, and Jews, a region where the unclean Gentiles outnumbered the Jews.

Paul attests to this phenomenon in his first letter to the Corinthians when he writes:

God chose the foolish things of the world so that the wise might be shamed, and God chose the weak things of the world so that God might shame the strong. God chose the lowborn of the world and those despised, and those who are nothing so that God can bring to nothing those that are. (1 Cor. 1:27–28)

Paul understood that the gospel message was dismissed by the center of society. The rejected stone became the cornerstone of the gospel, becoming a stumbling block for the builders who rejected it.

The fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke clearly illustrates this point. The chapter contains three parables. The first parable is about the shepherd of a hundred sheep, who, losing one, leaves the other ninety-nine and searches for the one that is lost. The second parable tells of a woman with ten drachmas, who, upon losing one, lights a lamp and sweeps the house until she finds the lost coin. The last parable is the story of the prodigal son, who squanders his father's inheritance, only to return penniless and yet find acceptance in his father's house. When a party is thrown to rejoice in the prodigal son's return, the dutiful son who remained and stayed faithful to the father becomes angry that his disobedient brother is brought back into the fold.

Traditionally, Euroamericans have interpreted these three parables by emphasizing those whom they consider lost. God's everlasting mercy for the lost (sheep, coin, or son) becomes the focal point in reading and understanding these passages, encouraging those in the center to go out and evangelize the lost. But this reading masks why Jesus told the parables in the first place and to whom they were directed. Usually, when reading these parables, the first three verses of the chapter are skipped or ignored. "All the tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to [Jesus] to hear him. But the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, 'This one receives sinners and eats with them!' He spoke to them these parables" (Luke 15:1-3). Luke begins the chapter by stating that those who resided on the margins, the tax collectors and sinners, were coming to hear Jesus. Worse yet, they were eating with him. Now, for those in the center, the Pharisees (who were upwardly mobile) and scribes (learned men of the Law), those in the margins of society were considered to be the *am ha-ares*, literally, "the people of the land." With the exception of the tax collectors, who collaborated with the Roman imperialist powers in order to survive, the people of the land were composed of the vast majority of the poor, people devoid of any power or privilege. Along with the tax collectors they were looked down upon for not keeping the purity regulations, not because they did not want to but because they were too busy trying to survive.

Like today's people of color, the dominant culture saw them as impure, ignorant, and responsible for their own marginalization, in short, sinners. These outcasts flocked to the liberating Good News Jesus proclaimed. As Jesus proclaimed his message, those with power and privilege found their space challenged. After all, according to Jesus, the tax collectors and prostitutes were making their way into the kingdom of God before the religious center (Matt. 21:31).

The three parables recorded in Luke 15 were not voiced by Jesus for the benefit of the "unsaved," that is, the lost sheep, the lost coin, or the prodigal son; rather the parables were intended for the religious center, the Pharisees and scribes who were murmuring. It is to this group that Jesus narrates the three parables. Yet all too often, when the dominant culture interprets these same parables, it focuses on those of the margins, who are usually perceived as lost. But as Jesus reached out to the margins of society, the center became upset that its constructed religious views might become jeopardized with the inclusion of "the people of the land." They were concerned that the addition of these "undesirables" would pollute their theological perspectives and their ornate temples. Their disdain for the margins is best illustrated in the prayer of the Pharisee as recorded in Luke: "The Pharisee was standing, praying to himself these things: God, I thank you that I am not as the rest of men, rapacious, unjust, adulterers, *or even as this tax collector*. I fast twice a week and tithe everything I receive" (18:11-12; emphasis added). While I am not questioning the concern God has for the lost, we misinterpret these parables when we ignore the subject of the narratives. Jesus was challenging the center to make room for those residing on the margins not because those on the margins require tutelage but rather, like the Pharisees and scribes of old, because there is much that the center needs to learn from the disenfranchised.

During my seminary years, many Euroamerican churches wanted to offer me positions (at about a quarter of what other ministers were being paid) to start a Hispanic mission somewhere in the basement. There was a sincere desire to "reach out to the lost," but when these Latino/as came to the church, they were ushered to the fellowship hall, where they could worship among themselves. The hope was that they would form a missionary church,

some place else. The message was clear: you are not welcomed in *our* sanctuary—get saved and move on!

It is always difficult for those at the center to listen to those who reside at the margins of society. The latter's interpretation of God's movement in the world challenges what society has always taught to be normative. Yet Jesus was able and willing to learn from the margins of his times. We sometimes forget that Jesus was human as well as divine. As a human, he had to learn how to overcome human frailties. As a child, Jesus had to learn how to walk, talk, and read. As an adult, he had to overcome the temptation of sin, specifically the human desire for fame and riches. Satan, according to Matthew 4:1–11, tempted Jesus with possessions (bread), privilege (jumping off the Temple and not being hurt because of who Christ is), and power (all the kingdoms of the earth). Although Jesus successfully rebuffed Satan while in the desert, it would be naive to assume that he was never again tempted. A careful reading of the Scriptures shows how he had to learn not to fall into future temptations.

Another opportunity to be tempted by Satan occurred when Jesus refused to minister to a marginalized woman. Matthew 15:21–28 recounts the story of a Canaanite woman who came to Jesus so that her daughter could be healed. The Canaanites were seen by the Jews in very much the same way people of color are today seen by some Euroamericans, as an inferior people, no better than dogs. When the Canaanite woman appealed to Jesus for help, the Lord responded by saying, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. It is not good to take the bread of the children and throw it to the dogs.” How many times have people of the margins heard similar remarks from Euroamericans? Jobs, educational opportunities, and social services are for “real” Americans. Instead of taking food away from the children of hard-working “Americans” to throw to the dogs, “they” should just go back to where they came from. Leticia Guardiola-Sáenz, interpreting the text from her social location, points out that this woman crosses the “border” not to worship her oppressor (Jesus) but to demand an equal place at the table of the Lord. She demands to be treated as an equal.¹¹

Now, Jesus' response was typical for a person who was inculcated to believe in the superiority of his or her particular race.

Jesus learned from his culture the superiority of Judaism and the inferiority of non-Jews. However, Jesus was willing to learn from a “woman of color” and thus avoided falling into the temptation of perpetuating racism. The woman responded by saying, “For even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table of their masters.” Her remark shocked Jesus into realizing that faith was not contingent on a person's ethnicity. In fact, Jesus had to admit that this was a woman of great faith.

Up to this point, the gospel message was only for the Jews. In fact, Jesus restricts the spreading of the Good News to his own race. In Matthew 10:5, Jesus sends his twelve disciples on their first missionary venture. He clearly instructs them, “Do not turn your steps into other nations, nor into Samaritan cities; rather, go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Yet five chapters later, from the Canaanite margins of Jesus' society came the challenge that the gospel would no longer be the exclusive property of one ethnic group and would instead become available for all who believe. Jesus learned something about his mission from this woman. By the end of his ministry, when he gives the great commission, he commands his followers to go out to all nations, not just the people of Israel. Now, if Jesus is willing to learn something from the margins of society, shouldn't his church be willing to do likewise?