

Where should Latin American Theology
Go To?
And Can It Help Us in Nebraska?

My second conference today will be somewhat independent from—hopefully not inconsistent with—the first one. It will probably be easier for you to follow, as my points come more in a linear manner than yesterday.

Last June, I was invited by the Jesuit University in Bogotá, Colombia, to spend four days to think together what is the future of Latin American theology. I had to sit down for some time and think really hard what was the future that I envisioned as possible and desirable and also what did I want to share with these brothers and sisters from another Christian denomination, who are struggling with some of the same issues as we are. I felt I had to be honest, yet loving. I did not feel they had invited me to say “everything is going in the right way, just keep going,” because that would not be true for the churches in Latin America. Then, these last weeks, as I thought again on the future I envisioned as possible and desirable and also on what I want to share with you, brothers and sisters, it occurred to me that some issues were equally pressing for us, even though that urgency is not apparent at first sight. Let me share some of my dreams for our Latin American Theology and let us see whether and to what extent they may say something to you here in Nebraska.

Liberation theology

I need to do a little of history here. After the second Vatican Council, as some Latin American bishops felt their concern for the poor in the continent had been ignored at the Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI conveyed a Latin American and Caribbean Bishops' Conference, which met in the city of Medellín, in Colombia, in 1968. Their commitments would be instrumental for our Protestant churches as well. Many of those bishops had first hand experience with the poor populations of the continent. Furthermore, they felt that, being Latin America a Catholic continent, they had a responsibility in struggling against oppression by the economic powers of the day. This is when Liberation Theology was officially born. It is not only a Catholic theology, although the size of this church in comparison to other denominations makes it predominant. One of the long-term processes born of this reformation of the Latin American Catholic Church is the

starring role of Comunidades Eclesiales de Base, local groups as church communities, rather than the parish as the center of church life. And these base communities centered their life on reading the Bible, on prayer, and on community actions derived from those studies (methodology of ver-juzgar-actuar: perceiving situations that affect them, assessing these situations with the help of the Bible study, and taking steps accordingly). Stress on the Bible and on commitment to the poor and destituted also brought movements of spirituality growth, witnessing and even martyrdom, as the political situation in the continent turned darker and darker (with the help of other dark people from this part of America) in the 1970s and 1980s. Stress on the Bible was one of the positive outcomes of this movement. Another one was the identification of the lay person, “the poor,” as subject of God’s kingdom—clearly not a Lutheran concept!—for building an alternative society.¹

As we all know, our theological point of view is colored by the glasses we wear: ethnic background, socio-economic position, particular painful experiences in life, education, and denomination among other glasses enable us to notice certain emphases in a text that other people do not notice. Or, we could say, bring to life God's Word in a particular way. It is therefore not surprising that Liberation theology in Latin America has highlighted texts that speak of God's preferential option for the poor and downtrodden and that the Exodus narrative, the words of the prophets, the historical poor Jesus rather than the heavenly Christ, and some parables have been among the most popular texts from the Bible. These words from the Magnificat are a good example:

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:52-53).

This is of course a condensation of a rather long period of time, of complex events, and of only a selection of theological themes. Not all Liberation theology is Catholic and not all Latin American theology is so liberating. But at least it helps you see where do I come from and what do I mean by “Latin American Theology”: liberation theology at fifty. Liberation theology at 50 is, like me and many of you, still the same as, yet very different from, the child at 5, the teenager, or the young adult. It has gone a long way, it has had its successes and disappointments, and it has also realized life has more shades than it looked like when it was born.

Pablo Richard, “40 años de Teología de la Liberación en América Latina y El Caribe (1962–2002),” in http://ar.geocities.com/rebilac_coordcont/richardtdl, p. 6 of 22. According to him, another positive, long-lasting effect of this reformation of the church was renewed ecumenism, much of which is still alive, particularly in Biblical movements (for instance, the journal *Revista de Interpretación Bíblica Latinoamericana*, coordinated by biblical scholars from different churches).

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1. Theology must go together with church and society

For many people, church is the last fortress to take refuge from a world that is changing too quickly. We not only love to sing the same old hymns, but we long for the stories learned in Sunday school as kids—and I mean, we long for the way we felt about those stories. Yet, we are no longer those kids. I don't need to speak of the people who have left the ELCA because their theology does not resist the scrutiny of the Gospel in strategic matters, such as sexuality, gender, or economics. We hear from time to time people who say: "The church should not get enmeshed in politics," but what they really are saying is, "the church should not have a public voice that does not agree with my own political ideas." I would never push for the church to ally itself with one political party, but it is simply bad Lutheran theology to say that the church should turn a blind eye to issues concerning Christians' daily living in the *res publica*, in the public realm.

What they deny is that allowing political and economic powers to go unbridled is political. But I don't need to remind you of this, you are a Church that has heard its call to speak and act publicly and I am proud of you!² We cannot do otherwise and be true to the Gospel, although we can mourn their departure and the tensions it creates in small towns and neighborhoods or seek a life in disagreement but without leaving the denomination. What we cannot do is not to articulate our daily life—cultural and political, as well as family life and nature—with the Bible and the Lutheran hermeneutics. Otherwise, we would be an empty shell of a church, speaking of how many angels can stand on a pin's head. Theology must read critically and prophetically our daily, “worldly” situation in order to be meaningful for our people. Here, the “classical” prophets of the eighth to sixth centuries bce are a wonderful source of inspiration, even with their disagreements and sometimes their bizarre behavior.³ They had to speak God's word to the social, political and cultural injustices of their time, which were, in the end, religious unfaithfulness to their God.

But there is another dimension of this need for theology to be close both to church and to society, that at least at home has proved to be very important. The “world outside the church” is hungry for a message that links God’s good news to their needs, that speaks to them in ways they understand. In particular, women and men who do not conform to

See, e.g., Guillermo Hansen, “Contours for a Public Lutheran Theology in the Face of Empire,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 49, 2 (2010), 97 (96-107); John R. Stumme, “Twofold Rule of God,” in Derek R. Nelson and Paul R. Hinlicky, ed. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther* (Oxford/N. York, Oxford University Press, 2017), <https://www-oxfordreference-com.jkmlibrary.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780190461843.001.0001/acref-9780190461843-e-345?rskey=GXFGKo&result=114>.
Deut 18:9-22 and Jer 28-29 are very clear that true prophecy is distinguished from false prophecy through its fulfillment (and no deadlines set!).
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the heterosexual cisgender normative hear disinterest at best and condemnation at worse from the religious world. Since we live in an era in which many people are not afraid of being fried in hell, the end result is large numbers of unchurched people (Wes Granberg-Michaelson can speak much more about this phenomenon than I can) who—unchurched or not—need God's word. Last year there were hot debates at home, as the congress discussed the 13th project of a law that would legalize abortion. For most people it comes as a surprise that most Protestant denominations support such a law. Squeezed between the Roman Catholic and the Evangelical voices, it is hard to make ourselves heard.

I am not here to promote abortion at all (but I strongly wish there was such a law to protect women's lives). I brought it because it is a telling example of how theology has to be in permanent dialogue with church and with society—and in fact, it is in permanent dialogue, although some of those dialogues look more like monologues between deaf people! The religious arguments clothed in pseudo-scientific jargon during the debate at the congress hall, the pressures on the legislators by several church leaders, the bullying and threats by “true Christians” to those who support such a law are theological statements as well.

2. The Church must take sides with the weakest members of society

Discussion on legalization of abortion is, finally, discussion on the autonomy of the female body. Female autonomy is a key concept and a very tricky one as well, as nobody can be autonomous without a strong support net, including family and friends, the State, and NGOs. Beyond sexual and reproductive autonomy, however, we live in a time in which neoliberalism has left most people with very little autonomy. Some are not even autonomous enough to eat daily! If the poor are a locus theologicum, theological subjects from whom we look at the world, we cannot be blind to mechanisms that kill people daily, from hunger to sickness, from drugs to borders, from land accumulation to seed monopolization. And there are bodies deprived of any autonomy, trafficked for slave work, prostitution, and pornography. These subjects, mostly robbed of any agency, are one of the two large areas of concern and mission that I can identify, together with migrants. I do not mean only concrete pastoral work with victims of trafficking and sex trade. God's mission through us also involves a re-education of males into new models of masculinity that do not see people in a weaker social, political or economic position (especially women and children) as bodies to be

taken at pleasure or destroyed. Only this year, femicides amount to 223 in my country (and it may look like little compared to massive shootings—we don't have them—but there should be none!). The Judeo-Christian mindset, derived from the Bible, is partly responsible, I am afraid, for this wrong assumption that a woman's sexuality belongs to a male (father, brother, husband, even father-in-law) and that in wars between males women may be taken as booty.⁴

Why would the church take sides with the lowliest members of society, whether Central American migrants, women or children rescued from sex trafficking, homeless, lonely seniors, or whoever, when that will not raise our congregations' attendance numbers nor will they contribute financially to keeping our sanctuaries and parsonages? Good question to ask, if we are honest to ourselves.

The straight answer: because God has a special tenderness for them and has trusted us with their care! It may be that God cares for them because God knows that society looks after its strongest, not its weakest members. It is biblical theology that God is strong enough to overturn any power and take sides with those who cannot confront those powers. The songs of the women in the pre-monarchic times are examples of this theology. The crossing of the Sea with God's last action against the missiles of that time and God's control of the enemies throughout the wilderness are examples:

Terror and dread fell upon them; by the might of your arm, they became still as a stone until your people, O LORD, passed by, until the people whom you acquired passed by. You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession, the place, O LORD, that you made your abode, the sanctuary, O LORD, that your hands have established. The LORD will reign forever and ever. (Exod 14:16-18)

The song of Deborah in Judges 5 speaks of a coalition of Israelite tribes conveyed under the leadership of Deborah and Barak, not a professional army but God’s people. A careful reading tells us that it was not them who won the battle, but the stars and the waters—God’s army—and an unlikely warrior, Jael the tent-dweller, of whom we do not know much (and who has been slandered because of her supposed “treason to the warrior” despite the song calling her “blessed by Yahweh.”). The song ends us with a prayer:

So perish all your enemies, O LORD! But may your friends be like the sun as it rises in its might. (v. 31),

Bibliography is abundant on these issues, including the depiction of God as a jealous and violent husband. Key biblical texts are, among others, Ezequiel chapters 16 and 23, Zac 4:2, Judges 5:31, chapters 19-21, and mentions in Judges 1 and other texts on women as part of the booty taken in war.

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and the notice that after the Canaanite's defeat "the land had rest forty years." (Incidentally, I am hearing classical music in the radio and Jessye Norman—who died yesterday at 74—is singing "He's got the whole world in his hand"!)

Likewise, Hannah's song after she fulfilled her vow of consecrating her son to Yahweh in case God finished her barrenness speaks of an overturn of the powerful and the feeble. It is a long song (from which Mary sings her Magnificat), but a few verses will suffice to see this preference by God for those who need God and do not trust in their weapons (and the issue of weapons is a really thorny one in this country, I know):

The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's, and on them he has set the world. He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail. (1 Sa 2:4-9)

Although it is not the only book to speak of God's care for the weak, Deuteronomy offers several examples of how this preoccupation has made its way into legislation. There are laws concerning the free Israelite or the resident alien who are very poor and earn their bread as daily workers:

When you make your neighbor a loan of any kind, you shall not go into the house to take the pledge. You shall wait outside, while the person to whom you are making the loan brings the pledge out to you. If the person is poor, you shall not sleep in the garment given you as the pledge. You shall give the pledge back by sunset, so that your neighbor may sleep in the cloak and bless you; and it will be to your credit before the LORD your God.

You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt. (Deut 24:10-15).

There are other laws dealing with the resident aliens and their few rights. But it is often the case that the problem lies not with the legislation, but with the mechanisms to not comply with it, as the widow of Jesus' parable shows (Luke 18:1-8). Furthermore, even in a system such as the one by which every tribe received enough land to live with dignity (the ideal model of Numbers to Judges), there was an intrinsic problem, namely, that women were unprotected when their husbands died. It is no wonder, then, that so many of the poorest were widows! And the so-called "orphan" was, actually, the child

whose father (never his mother) had died. To this pair of proverbial poor, later on the Levites and the resident aliens were added as those for whom God had a special regard. José Ramírez Kidd has studied the concept of *gēr* (the man dwelling in a land that is not the one apportioned by God for his tribe, thus resident alien, migrant, or foreigner) in the Pentateuch. He notices that in Deuteronomy it appears as part of a triad with widow and orphan mainly in texts “clustered around the theme of food” (14:29, 26:12-13).⁵ These texts are usually considered from the exilic or early post-exilic times—earlier than the texts where the term appears by itself, mainly in laws related to cultic matters. This scholar shows that by adding the resident alien to the better known pair widow-fatherless child, the Deuteronomists reflect their own experience of having had to migrate from their lands in the northern kingdom to Judah, after the siege and destruction of Samaria.

They became, together with women and children who had lost their male support, the father and his land the poor in need of justice and compassion.

That after being deported to Babylon they “re-read” their experience as a new exodus and thus they became sensitive to the needs of the resident alien among them:

You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. (Exod 23:9).

As the kingdom of Judah also fell and its scribes suffered exile, they theologized the foreigner. What does this mean? They could think “not only of ‘the foreigner within Israel’ [a sociological concept] but of ‘Israel itself as foreigner,’” a theological concept for their experience of diaspora.

They applied it also “in liturgical formulae in which the pray-er confesses himself/herself as alien before Yahweh: ‘For we are aliens and transients before you, as were all our ancestors’ 1 Chron 29,15.”⁶ Incidentally, this is also a wonderful example of how a biblical text reinterprets earlier traditions, re-inventing itself, so to speak.

3. The Church and “The Voice of The Voiceless”

To speak for those without voice has been one way in which Liberation theology and other theologies have expressed their commitment for the groups that are usually neglected. I am starting to wonder how can a hierarchy of a church represent those who are not heard! Perhaps we should leave that pretense and speak rather of being an accompanying or complementary voice to their own voices. The latest events in this country with immigrants and at the border have convinced me that there are those who

José E. Ramírez Kidd, *Alterity and Identity in Israel: The ger in the Old Testament* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999), 35. José E. Ramírez Kidd, *Para comprender el A.T.* (San José: Universidad Bíblica Latinoamericana, 2009), 105-106.

are rendered voiceless and in those situations only more powerful people can speak for them- A nagging question for me remains, namely, the relationship between our option for the lowest in society and a certain mindset that I associate with the idea of being a Christendom, of living in a prevailing Christian world or in a world in which Christianity conveys a sense of privilege over other religions.

4. The Church must forget Christendom

At least in our Latin American experience, Christendom is based on a very dangerous alliance between the secular state and one church, historically tied to colonization of the continent by the Castillian kings (and the Portuguese kings in Brazil). The situation is not very different in the United States, even if church and state are officially apart from each other. In my view, this tie between church and state is a disadvantage when it comes to Church life:

people think they know what Christianity is about, but in fact they have not been permeated by the love of God. Jesus is not the good news of God because they have heard bits and pieces but have not grasped the core of the gospel. The other reason that makes it a suspicious witness is its ties to power. Perhaps in colonial times it was the power of the blade, today it is economic and political power that discredit any claim to be the church of the people or the church of the poor (I am aware that a Scandinavian Lutheran or a British Anglican would disagree with me here).

Seen from the other side, the church thinks everybody knows what church is about and that is also not quite true any longer. The church, therefore, makes no effort to give reason of its joy, and the bridge between “church” and “the world” remains wide due to lack of understanding (which is not the same as rejecting God’s kingdom because of its subversive values).

I am increasingly taking note of the difference between being the official or majority church, the church supposed to be known by “everyone,” and being the body of Christ, witnessing in word and service, explaining its ethical options, and standing against any form of worship of the Empire. This is an issue in need of further thinking, especially as many Evangelicals dream of (and some are already actualizing those dreams) occupying the political arena.⁷

I see myself as part of a church that does not know what to do with the world and a world that does not know what to do with church. This lack of knowledge may be

Fábio Py, “Cristologia cristofascista de Bolsonaro”, Instituto Humanitas Unisinos/IHU online, junio 2019, <http://www.ihu.unisinos.br/78-noticias/589884-cristologia-cristofascista-de-bolsonaro?fbclid=IwAR1g75aaabpafgflTk5zHPOVi5n1x0IAAifGeTsPXZFUQrRQkEz5pM0JHFQ>.

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interpreted in two different ways. One is to take it to mean not to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God, as the true shepherd for the sheep, or as Messiah. I think this is the sense of these verses in John 1:

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, [...] but born of God. (vs.10-13)

Here, John is speaking of Jews (Nicodemus, Thomas, and many others) and Samaritans (the anonymous woman who met him at the well of Samaria and the many who came to believe in Jesus because of her proclamation) meeting Jesus and receiving him openly, in secret, or even rejecting him.

In the tradition of wisdom, John is setting right at the beginning of his gospel two ways, the ways of good and evil, the ways of the righteous who prospers and the wicked who fades. Does it sound like Psalm 1 to you? You are right, that is what I was thinking of (all the masculines referring to “the man” apply to us women as well, needless to say):

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

And at the end of chapter 20, “these [things] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” (v.31) Every one of us has been given these choices, life or death, God’s love or a life on our own and every one of us has chosen the best portion.

My perception is that there is also a different phenomenon, not a rejection of God, but ignorance of what is the church and what it should be. We live in a century in which many people may not believe in any God, may be atheist or agnostic, and will not be persecuted because of it. This is different from the Old Testament or the New Testament environments, in which nobody was an atheist or at least nobody dared to say so. Yes, the Empire made sure its Gods were properly appeased—well, just like today!—by proper sacrifice).

By the way: when a psalm speaks of fools who “say in their hearts, ‘There is no God,’” what they are doing is living as if they needed not to face God with their actions. The psalmist continues: “They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is no one who

does good.” (Psa 14:1). There was no question about being religious and about observing proper worship to the Deity/ies; the question was on which Deity or Deities one was to worship in order to survive and perhaps prosper in their time. There were even people, like Naaman the Syrian former leper healed by Elisha, who had to worship his national God because of his position as a Syrian general, but took with him Israelite ground to build an altar to Yahweh, who had healed him (2 Kings 5).

Today, however, many people live peaceful and meaningful lives with no relation whatsoever to church or to God. And not only are they not banned by the emperor or the Pope (as in Luther’s times), but they seem to raise their children with less prejudice and more tolerance towards others than do religious parents! What is it that brings out the worse of human beings in the name of God?

Summarizing: Theology must go together with church and society if it wants to be meaningful to people in their daily lives and to their societies. Going together does not mean going along with any proposal, but it means engagement with current affairs in a valiant and pertinent, prophetic way. Second, the church must take sides with the weakest members of society, being “voice of the voiceless,” according to different levels, from advocacy of and sanctuary to migrants to victims of sexual trafficking at the national and synodical level, to regional stands for farmers, homeless, and victims of domestic violence at home. In order to take the side of the less privileged, the Church must forget any pretense of being part of Christendom, with its alliance with the conquerors and empires. Furthermore, in order to reach the alienated from church or the unchurched who want to know of Christ, it needs to leave nothing taken for granted and be ready to give reason of its joy, its hope, and its prophetic stands. Many of these proposals are not my invention, but were the theological food I was fed in seminary through liberation theology. Still, it might be translated into sound Lutheran theology (at least as I see it), looking at the God of the cross rather than seeking undue glory.

5. The Church must reject any alliance with patriarchy

Liberation theologians made another contribution to theology, that of looking at poverty not as a personal condition, but as a socio-economic and cultural system affecting the whole world, moving resources to richer areas and impoverishing whole continents. Put in theological terms, sin is systemic, not only personal. Elsa Tamez, a well-known theologian from our region, shows in her PhD dissertation this systemic sin in the letter of Paul to the Romans.

Liberation theology was able to see socio-economic oppression as systemic sin, but it was unable to add gender to their analysis and name patriarchal oppression. And of course, being theologians and mainly clergy, they were blind to their own participation in the sin of subordination of women—not to speak of gender inclusivity—in society but also in church. Today, any liberation theology, especially a Roman Catholic one, must keep speaking with and on behalf of “los sin voz” (the voiceless ones), the displaced peasants, the poor and marginalized, and it must add gender analysis to its systemic analysis of sin. It is certainly not the same to be a poor male landless farmer as being a poor female landless farmer, as being a poor transgender landless farmer, living in camps close to the Amazonian rainforest, for instance. It is not the same to be an oppressed heterosexual male blue-collar worker in a factory as being a homosexual male or a homosexual female in that same factory.

It is not the same to be a poor descendant of Polish or Italian immigrants as being a poor descendant of an Angolese slave. It is not the same to work in a factory as to prostitute oneself in the vicinity of that same factory. Classical liberation theology could not see these nuances beyond ethnic and class conflicts. This is an area, therefore, in which newer generations of theologians have been working, as well as in theologies of African descent, aboriginal theologies, and ecofeminism. We know gender is an important glass to wear, but it is always good to remind ourselves of the power patriarchal systems still have, isn't it? Yesterday I mentioned Paul's choice not to use his freedom ("Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible," 9:19, see also his affirmation that "everything is permitted," 6:12, 10:23). Yesterday we looked at them from the angle of what it means to be church for the sake of the world: Paul is ready to leave his freedom, so that some may embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Today, I want to look at him with my contention that the church must abstain from any (farther) alliance with patriarchy. Patriarchy is a system that affects everyone, not only women. A patriarchal apostle has to be a strong, free man. A patriarchal apostle cannot rejoice in his weakness, is entitled to his freedom and uses it, and does not follow a delinquent condemned to death on the cross! Furthermore, a patriarchal apostle joins communities of fellow men, in which foreigners, women and children, and slaves are for their enjoyment, not to be their equals! Do you follow my point? Our societies today follow the patriarchal model, not the Galatians 3:28 model. And Christian churches, to a larger or shorter degree, do as well. Some of them have patriarchal anthropology and ecclesiology so engrained that they cannot even see their biases and counter-attack calling “gender ideology” what is gender struggle for justice (yes, even some Lutheran

communities, unfortunately). While that is not our case and we can be proud of our gender inclusive ecclesiology, we need to be always alert. I consider myself a patriarchal person in permanent recovery, as addicts are: there is always the danger, right at hand, of falling again in the allure of power, control, and discrimination against the other. For instance, Don't we value much more the pastor who preaches and administers the sacraments than the deaconess who serves in concrete ways in our communities? Is that not part of our theology, where preached word and sacrament are the marks of the church? Do we consider deaconal work a way of preaching the word or is it a different, lower, way of living ministry? I am not pointing any accusatory finger against anyone or any church body; these are questions that I have myself and so far I have not been able to get a satisfactory answer.

Yet one more step the Church should take is in acknowledging its internal diversity through a more colorful, more diverse, use of language, especially in liturgy and in speaking on God. The Brazilian Roman Catholic nun and biblical theologian Tea Frigerio gave me an idea. In a short reflection on the story of Pentecost in Luke 2, she goes back to the tower of Babel:

To want to get to the heavens in order to have power over God and thus to dominate the other peoples. Today, we would say “globalization.” The threat is quelled by God’s action of bringing to existence variety and diversity of tongues. It is not confusion, but diversity. Divine Ruah [Hebrew for “Spirit” or “wind”] loves no uniformity, she loves plurality, variety, diversity. In the following narrative, Luke shows that the gift of tongues is not given for domination, but rather to be set in the service of the Good News and to produce witnesses of the Resurrection.⁸

The traditional interpretation of this diversity is that the wide range of languages we have today were then created, and Luke himself lists several peoples who had come to Jerusalem for the feast of Shabuot. And that is right, but at the same time it occurred to me as I read her that we could think not of languages but of forms of speech. There are several different jargons within one language and even within one country; they are constantly re-shaped according to experience and to need. Why not interpreting the first Pentecost as the feast of the different, fluid, contradictory jargons within one society or community? Academic proper jargon, together with that of rural mid-Western Anglosaxon, African American, Latino, Native American, Asian American, teenagers' LGTBQ jargons, the divine ruah being the only One capable of conducting such an orchestra.

Tea Frigerio belongs to the order of Xaverian Missionaries of Mary. Her reflection on Pentecost may be found in different web pages. Apparently this is the original one: "A festa de Pentecostes no olhar de uma teóloga comprometida com a Igreja na Amazônia," <http://www.ihu.unisinos.br/589836-festa-de-pentecostes-ano-c-a-divina-ruah-irrompe-na-historia>. Emphasis in the original.

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Not chaos, Frigerio, says, but diversity is the gift of Pentecost to the church. Only through a tongue we understand may God's salvation be announced to us:

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. (Rom 10:14-17)

Here we are coming to the core of our ministry, to the place where we all here feel at home: preaching the word of God. As clergy or PMAs many of us are professionals of preaching. And that is very good! It belongs to the good order within the church that those called be ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Yet, since we are, precisely, that part of church that is ministers of the word and sacrament (ordained or assistants to), it is a good reminder that the church is the community of the baptized, not of the ordained. I would bet Wes Granberg-Michaelson can tell us more about how churches grow. But from my perspective, this is what I would like to contribute to our discussion today.

6. “The Church, A Creature of The Word”

Lutheran theology is the best one—at least for Lutherans. Not only it is the best, but, since I am not in systematics and therefore I am stepping on eggshells here, I will not propose a reformulation of the Lutheran concept of the Church! We know, furthermore, that Luther was, like me, a biblical scholar and not a systematic theologian. And biblical scholars are allowed to be “inconsistent,” are we not? Thank you!9

We are perceiving at home that we need to look again at the concrete manifestations, or practice of, ministry in our Church beyond the Large Catechism. My colleague Alan Eldrid loves to talk of this great formulation, because of the place of the Church not for itself but as work of the Holy Spirit:

In other words, he [the Holy Spirit] first leads us into his holy community, placing us upon the bosom of the church, where he preaches to us and brings us to Christ.

Our ministry should derive from soteriology, not from ecclesiology. This is our theory but in practice ecclesiology and ministry tend to be assimilated to each other. see Cheryl M. Peterson, "Ministry and the Church," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther* (Oxford University Press online, 2017. Retrieved 1 Oct. 2019, from <https://www-oxfordreference-com.jkmlibrary.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780190461843.001.0001/acref-9780190461843-e-362> .

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The church is thus the product of the Holy Spirit and, frankly, I am not the one to put constraints to her work (despite Luther's use of the masculine pronoun, the Ruah is feminine). For instance, in her chapter on "Ministry and the Church" in the Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther, Cheryl Peterson states that:

Although the individual believer is "called through the gospel" and receives the gift of faith, this only happens through a visible assembly of believers. As Luther writes, "The Spirit first leads us into his holy community, placing us in the church's lap, where he preaches to us and brings us to Christ." In this way, the church is the "mother" who begets each Christian through the proclamation of the Word. As believers are brought to faith, they also are incorporated into the holy community as "a part and member, a participant and co-partner in all the blessings it possesses."

The traditional view is that the preaching of the Gospel is done in the Church (“the church is the ‘mother’ who begets each Christian through the proclamation of the Word,” in her quotation). As we at home read Luther’s statement in the Large Catechism, however, we tend to differentiate the Holy Spirit calling, like Lady Wisdom, from the streets and the markets (Proverbs 9:1-10) and assign the church a role not so much as the mother through whom Christians are born, but as the child of the Word herself who joins us to a circle of siblings. If “Church” is wherever God’s word is preached and the Sacraments shared, then I do not think that I am speaking of a different ecclesiology, as long as “church” is not any organized movement. Church is then a very broad circle of people into which those called by the Holy Spirit are added or, if you love the image of motherhood, the hen who holds us under her arms.

I find very healthy the hierarchical difference between Holy Spirit, Church, and ministry, as we tend to take ourselves too seriously and in too high esteem. Yes, ministry is extremely important, but ministers must be servants of the Word because in the end, the Church was set for the sake of God's Word and not the other way around. At least in Roman Catholic environments like ours, ordained ministers—Roman Catholic priests, Protestant pastors, evangelical pastors, Rabbis—have some sort of sacred aura and all kinds of abuse derive from this wrong ascription to humans of what pertains to God and to the community of the baptized.¹⁰

Since I am a biblical scholar and today I have not brought up many texts to you, here there is one juicy story. As you probably remember, when Hannah weaned Samuel, he became Yahweh's slave in the Shiloh sanctuary,

Agenor Brighenti, "Do binômio clero-leigos a comunidade-ministérios", part 2 of Em que o Vaticano II mudou a Igreja?, 23/1/2018, <http://www.amerindiaenlared.org/contenido/12055/do-binomio-cleroleigos-a-comunidadeministerios-em-que-o-vaticano-ii-mudou-a-igreja-2/>, speaks of the Roman Catholic Church after the Vatican II and affirms that "It is from a community all of it prophetic, priestly, and royal, set within society, that all ministries, even the ordained ministries, flow to serve the community."

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under the authority of Eli, the same priest who had rebuked Hannah when she prayed, thinking that she was babbling because of drunkenness. Eli was very old and heavy, both literally and in his attitude towards God's issues in his sanctuary. The Shiloh sanctuary had been in the hands of one family, Eli's, and soon would be in the hands of another family, that of Samuel, "son of Jeroham son of Elihu son of Tohu son of Zuph, an Ephraimite." There were important reasons for Eli's family to have lost their seats of honor as priests in an important sanctuary. I'll read you a portion of their story:

Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels; they had no regard for the LORD or for the duties of the priests to the people. When anyone offered sacrifice, the priest's servant would come, while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand, and he would thrust it into the pan, or kettle, or caldron, or pot; all that the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. This is what they did at Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there. Moreover, before the fat was burned, the priest's servant would come and say to the one who was sacrificing,

“Give meat for the priest to roast; for he will not accept boiled meat from you, but only raw.” And if the man said to him, “Let them burn the fat first, and then take whatever you wish,” he would say, “No, you must give it now; if not, I will take it by force.” Thus the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the LORD; for they treated the offerings of the LORD with contempt.

Now Eli was very old. He heard all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting. He said to them, “Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all these people. No, my sons; it is not a good report that I hear the people of the LORD spreading abroad. If one person sins against another, someone can intercede for the sinner with the LORD; but if someone sins against the LORD, who can make intercession?” But they would not listen to the voice of their father; for it was the will of the LORD to kill them. Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and with the people. (1 Sam 2:12-17, 22-26)

There are expectations and these have to do with three kinds of action. The first one is inappropriate behavior concerning sacrifices, or misappropriation of the fat of the offerings, use of force, gluttony, etc.

Eli's sons are bent on devouring the choicest meats. The author's deliberate use of the word "fat" (v. 16) is important. Regulations considering the treatment of fat were strict in cultic practice. Fat is the portion of the offering that belongs to God; it is not to be eaten but to be burned in a "pleasing odor" to God (Lev. 3:16– 17). But the sons of Eli seem little concerned with this regulation. By taking meat from others they fatten themselves, with little regard for the regulations that maintain cultic order and protect the welfare of the people. Here, the people try to keep the commandments while the priests have little regard for them.¹¹

David H. Jensen, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2003), 33. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/jkmlibrary/detail.action?docID=3446606>.

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Their second sin is not to have repented from their bad behavior, despite Eli's warning that sinning against God would only bring death. Between these two sins, almost in passing, there is another short notice, namely, that the priests "lay with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting" (2:22).

Eli rebukes his sons by claiming that what they have done is the gravest kind of offense. A sin against another person can be dealt with through intercession, "but if someone sins against the Lord, who can make intercession?" (v. 25). Here Eli connects sin against neighbor to sin against God. His sons take advantage of people: devouring sacrifices and taking others for sexual pleasure. But he also claims that the particular actions of his sons are grave because they are the ones who intercede for others before God. Their offense is not merely their disregard of religious ritual; by stealing and taking from others, they sin against God.¹²

I do not need to tell you about sexual harassment in the workplace or in the church. We all know that it is wrong and why it is wrong. Since priests (at least, according to the legislation we have in Lev 21:13-15, which might be later, yes) neither made chastity vows nor were obliged to have only one spouse, their sin is not sexual activity per se or adultery (except with married women). Their sin is to take what belongs to God, the offerings and the female ministers, and to say in their hearts “there is no God,” to take one text mentioned earlier. It is a comfort that such actions do not go unnoticed to God! By the way, had you ever noticed that there is mention here of “the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting”? They are mentioned only twice in the Bible, here and in Exod 38:8, where it is said that the basin of bronze with its stand of bronze for the sanctuary was made “from the mirrors of the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting.”

These women were not just looking around or praying, since the verb used to speak of them is a technical one for “have their duties” or “serve.” Actually, the term “Sebaoth” applied to Yahweh comes exactly from this same root and it indicates a host or army standing on duty.¹³

Two chapters later, Eli’s warnings come to pass. Hophni and Phineas, his sons and custodians of the Arch of the covenant die in battle and the arch is taken as trophy by the Philistines. But there is something else in this story that I want to show you (and I apologize if you know the story already). A man who managed to escape battle arrived and told Eli what had happened.

When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell over backward from his seat by the side of the gate; and his neck was broken and he died, for he was an old man, and heavy. He had judged Israel forty years.

Jensen, 35. The term used is the participle of the verb abc; see, e.g., Num 4:22-23,

Now his daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, about to give birth. When she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed and gave birth; for her labor pains overwhelmed her. As she was about to die, the women attending her said to her, "Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son." But she did not answer or give heed. She named the child Ichabod, meaning, "The glory has departed from Israel," because the ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and her husband. She said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured." (1 Sa 4:18-22)

This is the confirmation of the prophetic announcement to Samuel that from now on he and his house would be priests at Shiloh. But I love this story for another reason, namely, that here we have an anonymous woman, known only through her relationship to males (father-in-law, husband, brother-in-law, son) whom the biblical authors give the privilege to articulate God's doings.

Yes, hers is a very short story, since she gives birth to a son, names him, and dies. Yet, she is able to see and to name what her husband could not, that Yahweh's glory had been dwelling in Israel, in Shiloh, at the sanctuary; but now it has departed: Where is [God's] glory, ei-kabod? That's the name of her son, 'dAbk'-yai(, 'î-kābôd! We know her husband's name, Phineas, one of the scoundrels who defied God's glory by living as if there was no God to respond to, by taking the part of the sacrifices due to God, by taking the female ministers that belonged to God, by discrediting their father, a priest of God. But we do not know her name and, of course, she could not hold priesthood in ancient Israel. "Yahwe's Glory" is one of Yahweh's names preferred by Ezekiel (e.g., chapters 10, 43). A theology that is alerted by gender issues and feminist insights, taking seriously also the priesthood of all believers, would recognize her theological role and include her among the several champions of the faith in Hebrews, would it not?

Is it not the task of theology to think hermeneutically about our biblical characters, our historiography, and our lenses? Women's ordination was and is a very important milestone in the history of ministry. Today, however, I want to encourage us to keep examining our ministerial models in the light of the dangers of power, privilege, and prestige. I wonder if the women who served at the tent of meeting would have dreamed with being priests in the likeness of Phineas and Hophni or even Eli! Or would they have wanted to name the Glory's departure and die?

I am reaching the end of my presentation here. I have shared with you some of the concerns and dreams I have with regard to Latin American theology. I have also mentioned briefly that at home some of us are wondering where are church and society leading us to in terms of ministry. Traditional congregational ministry has proven inefficient to bring people to church or even to keep baptized people in church.

On the other hand, several people leave fundamentalist churches because of its theology or practices and they seek a safe haven to keep gathering as Christians. And we can see also that the world is hungry for a saving word. But attendance of Sunday worship, particularly early morning Sunday worship, is not appealing to many. Can we see God's action through us in any other way than through Sunday attendance? Can we see God's saving hand in groups that we will not see in our traditional activities? Can we see Church in a word that is preached in a conversation between teenagers or in a group of young professionals, while they have dinner? And how do we count membership then?

It is telling to me that oftentimes, when Israel dreams with a better world in the last days, it becomes more explicitly inclusive than we tend to credit it for. There are two texts from the prophets that are important here, and with them I want to wrap up:

Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. (Joel 2:28-29/3:1-2)

Thus says the LORD: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the LORD of hosts shall be called the holy mountain. Thus says the LORD of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. Thus says the LORD of hosts: Even though it seems impossible to the remnant of this people in these days, should it also seem impossible to me, says the LORD of hosts? Thus says the LORD of hosts: I will save my people from the east country and from the west country; and I will bring them to live in Jerusalem. They shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness. (Zech 8:3-8)

Life in the company of God is imagined as a communion of people with no hierarchy nor discrimination: in Joel's prophecy even male and female slaves dream and prophesy, filled with God's power. Zechariah, on the other hand, speaks of a life of shalom for God's people, brought from every nation. God will dwell in the temple and the people in the city. Not one will be lost, we may be sure, even though we do not know their numbers. God does, though. Just as God knows the numbers of those belonging to the Church, even though we do not. Thanks be to God!

Thank you for this chance to share in your Theological Conference.