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The Galilee Principle: A Latino Evangelical Perspective

DANIEL A. RODRIGUEZ

In an undergraduate religion course I teach at Pepperdine University, my students and I were discussing the cultural and religious significance of the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe among Hispanic Catholics. Obviously disturbed, an evangelical student lamented out loud, “Why can’t [Hispanic Catholics] forget the saints and the Virgin Mary and just worship Jesus Christ?” Before I could answer, another student, a Latina from Guatemala, responded, “We can relate better to *la Virgen de Guadalupe* because she is one of us.” Her candid answer raises a relevant and urgent question for those interested in communicating the gospel among Hispanics in the United States: What would it take for U.S. Hispanics like me to say, “We can relate better to Jesus of Nazareth because He is one of us!”? If my Guatemalan student is representative of other Latinos in the United States, the answer is obvious: Hispanics must believe that in some respect Jesus is one of us, *pura raza*. That is precisely what Virgil Elizondo has endeavored to establish in his book *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*.¹ Elizondo has developed what he describes as a theology of *mestizaje*, a theology of liberation for Mexican Americans that is characterized by a fundamental search for identity that leads to conscientization and liberation.

DOING THEOLOGY FROM A LATINO PERSPECTIVE

Hispanic theologians insist that reading the Bible from the perspective of the rejected and the oppressed constitutes a return to and recovery of the fundamental message of the Bible.² For Elizondo, that fundamental message is described as “the Galilee principle,” manifest in the incarnation, cross, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.³ The Galilee principle affirms that the fundamental message of the Bible is that God chooses that which the world rejects to bring divine blessings to all. This is seen most clearly in the incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth, who lived and died as a despised Galilean mestizo (cf. John 1:43–46; 7:40–43, 50–52).

Rereading the gospels from the perspective of Hispanics who live as “foreigners in their native land,”⁴ Elizondo has concluded that the human context of the historical Jesus is analogous to the sociohistorical context of Hispanics in the United States.

Elizondo insists that Latinos and other mestizo peoples in the United States and around the world will not only find their true identity in the Galilean experience of Jesus; they will also discover their true purpose and mission in life. The Galilean experience of Jesus reminds us that God consistently chooses those who are despised and rejected to bless humankind with the gospel. Elizondo goes even further, arguing that the Galilean experience of Jesus of Nazareth anticipates the experience of many people who, like Mexican Americans, are rejected, living in the borderland between two cultures. In other words, Jesus is one of us!

THE NATURE OF A CONTEXTUALLY RELEVANT CHRISTOLOGY FOR CHICANOS

From an evangelical perspective, a contextually relevant Christology must focus on the role of the interpreter’s context as well as on the essential nature of the gospel. It will therefore direct attention toward the need to communicate the gospel so that it faithfully and prophetically speaks God’s word to the total context

in which our people are now living.⁵ In the case of Mexican Americans, that means “doing theology” from the perspective of “a people twice conquered, twice colonized, and twice mestized.”⁶ In other words, a contextually relevant Christology for Latinos of Mexican descent must seek to explain and interpret the meaning of the gospel for Chicanos, answering the questions raised by the Christian faith using the thoughts, values, and categories of truth that are authentic to Mexican Americans.⁷ Implied in this process is an important assumption that I embrace without reservation: Theology’s function is to serve and equip the church. Therefore, I must not only focus on the role of the interpreter’s sociohistorical context; I must also and *above all* focus on the essential nature of the gospel when elaborating a missiological Christology for Mexican Americans. This explains the framework for the Christology that I propose.

What would it take for U.S. Hispanics like me to say, “We can relate better to Jesus of Nazareth because He is one of us!”?

THE LIMITATIONS OF A CHRISTOLOGY ELABORATED ON THE GALILEAN IDENTITY OF JESUS

The experience of the historical Jesus as a despised mestizo from the borderlands of Galilee affirms the identity of rejected and marginalized peoples worldwide. Nevertheless, it is by itself inadequate to explain the full meaning of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ in terms consistent with explicit New Testament interpretations of Jesus’ passion and vindication. In fact, it must be inferred from the gospels, because neither Jesus nor any New Testament writer ever suggests that his passion was a result of his Galilean identity.

In light of these observations, I propose the development of a contextually relevant Christology that is informed by and articulates a specifically Hispanic perspective and yet is faithful to the scriptures and their call for men and women everywhere to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38; 16:31). I will demonstrate that a contextually relevant Christology that is developed around the rejected-stone passages in Mark 12, Acts 4, and 1 Peter 2 is biblically sound and relates the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in a contextually relevant way to Mexican Americans.

THE STRENGTHS OF A CHRISTOLOGY ELABORATED ON THE REJECTED-STONE IMAGERY

New Testament scholars acknowledge that the rejected-stone passages are among the most popular of text groupings not only in the New Testament but also in the early patristic writings.⁸ In the New Testament, a study of the stone passages begins in Mark 12:10, where Jesus refers to himself as the rejected stone of Ps 118:22, which has become the cornerstone. In Acts 4:11 Peter uses the stone imagery as an apologetic for the cross against Jewish opponents of the gospel. In 1 Pet 2:6–8 the stone becomes the cornerstone of the sure foundation of Isa 28:16, as well as the rejected stone and a stone that causes men to stumble. While the stone passages in 1 Peter reiterate the testimony of Jesus Christ as the rejected stone of Ps 118:22 (1 Pet 2:7), they move beyond a christological application to an ecclesiological one. In other words, in 1 Pet 2:4–10 the author identifies Jesus Christ as the stone rejected by the builders, but he does so in order to emphasize the identity of his readers as believers, in contrast to those who do not believe (1 Pet 2:7). Thus in the New Testament, two uses are made of the imagery of the rejected stone: a christological use and a corporate application as revealed in the “living stones” of 1 Pet 2:5.

The image of Jesus as the rejected stone of Ps 118:22 provides Mexican Americans with an explicit Christology that relates the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in a contextually relevant way. That is, one of the greatest strengths of the rejected-stone imagery is that Jesus and the apostles use it to

interpret the passion and vindication of Jesus. In the second place, the interpretation of Jesus as the rejected stone elicits the response, "Jesus is one of us." The context of each rejected-stone passage clearly teaches that Jesus was rejected by his own people (Mark 12:7; Acts 4:10–11; 1 Pet 2:4–8), not only because of his Galilean identity, but *primarily* because he claimed to be the Son of God, sent with divine authority to call all men to repent and believe the good news (Mark 1:15). Jesus' experience with rejection at the hands of his own people resonates with Chicanos, who are often treated as foreigners in their native land. And Jesus'

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exaltation to the "head of the corner" recalls Elizondo's Galilee principle, reminding us that God chooses that which is despised and rejected to bless humankind with the gospel. But Jesus' parable of the tenants and quotation of Ps 118:22 (Mark 12:1–12) also reminds our people that the Son's rejection and vindication was no cultural or sociohistorical accident. Instead, it was predicted by Christ and foretold earlier by the prophets (Luke 9:21–22, 44; 12:50; 17:25; 18:31–33; cf. 24:7, 25–27).

Jesus' subversive retelling of the vineyard parable in Mark 12 also reminds Latinos that to ignore or reject the authority of the Christ is no small matter,

because he is none other than the "beloved son" (Mark 12:6). Just as the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish leaders ultimately led to the destruction of their sacred symbols and way of life (cf. Mark 12:9), Latinos must be reminded that to reject or ignore God's precious stone will likewise cause our people to stumble and fall in shame in this life and on the day of his glorious appearing (1 Pet 2:8, 12).

The temptation among many Latinos to ignore the image of the rejected son as irrelevant overlooks three important themes in the New Testament. The first is that the cross and resurrection is the magnum opus of Jesus Christ. It validates his divine sonship and authority to call all mankind to repent and believe the gospel. This is seen clearly in Acts chapters 2–5 (e.g., 2:36–40; 3:17–20; 5:29–32). The second is that the cross and resurrection is also the pattern for Christian discipleship in the barrio. In essence, to reject the image of Jesus as the rejected stone is to reject the path from rejection to election to which Jesus invites each would-be follower. Reflecting on passages such as Mark 8:34 and 10:29–31, Larry Hurtado correctly observes that the author was concerned to emphasize that "the cross was not only the key work of Jesus but also the pattern for discipleship."⁹ Finally, the image of Jesus Christ as the rejected stone is used in Mark, Acts, and 1 Peter to build hope in the midst of suffering and to strengthen the resolve of those perceived as aliens and strangers to live obedient and holy lives (1 Pet 1:14–16) patterned after Jesus, the Suffering Servant (1 Pet 2:21–24; cf. Mark 8:34; Acts 5:41). Their motivation is nothing less than the "new birth into a living hope" (1 Pet 1:3, 23) and a new identity as God's covenant people (1 Pet 2:9–10; Eph 2:19–20).

Furthermore, this biblical Christology affirms that rather than being excluded as "other," Latinos who embrace the rejected stone "are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people [i.e., the Jews] and members of God's household" (Eph 2:19).¹⁰ For this reason, the author of 1 Peter ascribes to his rejected Gentile readers honorific titles and privileges previously reserved for the physical descendants of Abraham (1 Pet 2:9–10).

THE MISSIOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE REJECTED STONE

Thus the Christology of the rejected stone not only affirms the sociocultural identity of those who live in the "Galilean borderlands," or barrios, of contemporary America; it also relates the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus in a biblical and culturally relevant way. Furthermore, the Christology of the rejected stone addresses the fundamental question of our purpose and mission as Christians of Mexican descent. The cul-

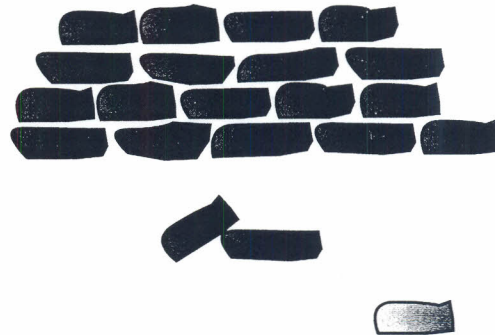
turally relevant Christology described in this study addresses missiological issues concerning the motivation, agents, means, and goals of mission in a biblically and theologically sound and relevant manner.

First, the Christology of the rejected stone addresses the question of the *motivation for mission* by and among Chicanos. The Christology of the rejected stone originated with Jesus of Nazareth, who reminds us in the parable of the wicked tenants (Mark 12:1–11) that the vineyard (i.e., Israel) was created by and belongs to God. It is God who takes the initiative to create and graciously rent the vineyard to undeserving tenants (12:1). Later, the creator and owner of the vineyard desires what belongs to him (12:17), so he sends his servants to collect some of the fruit of the vineyard (12:2). The wicked tenants, however, try to seize and possess what is not theirs—the vineyard. Ultimately, the tenants commit the gravest of sins: they murder the heir, the beloved son (12:7–8). Clearly, God’s creative role and dominion over his creation is the point at issue. In Pauline terminology, the wicked tenants are guilty of foolishly rebelling against and dethroning the creator and owner (cf. Rom 1:18–32).

In Mark 12:9 Jesus then asks a rhetorical question: “What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.” The parallel passage in Matt 21:43 identifies the “others” to whom God will entrust the new vineyard: “people who will produce its fruit.” Allegorically, this was the motivation behind the mission of the beloved Son. In the immediate context of the gospel, the “fruit” the prophets and Jesus came to collect was repentance and faith in the good news of the approaching kingdom of God (Mark 1:15). Similarly, in the context of Acts 4:8–12, the messengers of the Lord called on the wicked tenants and builders (i.e., the Jewish leaders) to repent and turn to God (Acts 3:19; cf. 2:38–40; 5:30).

Like the beloved son, Christians are God’s messengers sent into the vineyard (i.e., the world) to collect from the tenants some of the fruit of the vineyard. The task is not easy. Like the Christ, we too will suffer (Mark 8:34–35) and be sent away empty-handed, because the tenants want to seize and possess what is not theirs—sovereign rule over their lives. We are therefore motivated for mission because God, the creator and sustainer of the vineyard, has graciously entrusted his vineyard to us, undeserving tenants who produce the fruit of the kingdom of God (Matt 21:43). And what is the fruit of the kingdom? In Petrine terms, we produce the fruit of the kingdom when we declare the praises of him who called us “out of darkness [e.g., rebellion and ignorance] into his wonderful light” (1 Pet 2:9). We also produce the desired fruit of the kingdom when we live such good lives among our unbelieving *paisanos* (countrymen) that, though they wrongfully accuse us, they will see our good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us (1 Pet 2:12).

Second, the Christology of the rejected stone addresses the question of the *agents of mission* by and among Chicanos. In the parable of the tenants, Jesus tells the Jewish rulers that the owner will destroy those who reject the son/stone and give the vineyard to others (Mark 12:9). The stone passages in Acts 4 and 1 Peter 2 also reveal the identity of the “others” to whom Jesus refers. In Acts 4:13 the “others” are identified as “unschooled, ordinary men” who have been with Jesus. In 1 Peter the “others” include those who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ from the empty way of life handed down to them by their forefathers (1 Pet 1:18–19) and who are now aliens and strangers in the world because of their imitation of the Suffering Servant (1 Pet 2:21–23; 3:16). Clearly, God’s preferred agents for evangelization are those who are rejected by the dominant society (1 Pet 2:12; 3:16; 4:4, 14). These are his preferred messengers to the tenants in his vineyard!



Paul says the same thing in 1 Cor 1:26–31, where he reminds his readers that their own experience demonstrates God’s *modus operandi*. The apostle states that God chose the foolish things, weak things, lowly things, despised things—and the things that are not—to shame and nullify the things that are. God didn’t choose the economically and educationally privileged or the upwardly mobile, middle-class Jew, but the unschooled and ordinary Galilean (Acts 4:13). Borrowing Samuel Soliván-Román’s epithet, God chose those who live in the “belly of the beast,”¹¹ the poor mestizo underclass, the despised undocumented laborer, the single mother on welfare, and the former gang member to go into his vineyard. The stone passages analyzed in this study also reveal that God did not send his servants exclusively to the oppressed; he sent them to the oppressors as well (Mark 12:12; Acts 4:8–11). In other words, mission is not just *to* the barrio but also *from* the barrio (Acts 1:8).

Third, the Christology of the rejected stone addresses the question of the *means of mission* by and among Chicanos. The stone testimony examined in this paper suggests that a crucified life (Mark 8:31–32; 12:7), a Spirit-filled life (Acts 4:8–13), and a consecrated/holy life (1 Pet 1:15) are the means of mission.

In John 12:32 Jesus says, “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” When he declares the true meaning of this to his disciples in Mark 8:31–32, he also explains that the “crucified life” is the means of mission not only for the beloved Son but also for his disciples, those sent by him as he was sent by the Father (John 20:21). The crucified life, voluntary self-denial for the sake of the kingdom, is also evident in 1 Peter, which was addressed to people who lived in a context in many ways analogous to that of Chicanos. They too were accused of doing wrong (2:12), spoken of maliciously and slandered (3:16), and verbally abused and insulted because of the name of Christ (4:4, 14). There, Peter recalls the image of Christ, the Suffering Servant of Isa 53:3–9. He calls his rejected missionaries to follow in Christ’s steps (2:21). They too must suffer grief in all kinds of painful trials (1:6; 4:12) for the name of Christ.

Second, like their Savior, who was filled with the Spirit and led into the desert, into Galilee, to Jerusalem, and to Calvary, Peter and John in their experience before the Sanhedrin remind us that the crucified life must be accompanied by the Spirit-filled and Spirit-directed life (Acts 4:8). Luke also informs his readers that a Spirit-filled life is nurtured by prayer and that it results in bold proclamation (Acts 4:31).

Third, the crucified life and the Spirit-filled life must be accompanied by the consecrated, or holy, life.

¡Somos familia! We are family! The chief cornerstone of this new divine household is none other than the rejected stone from Galilee. And to our surprise, he is one of us!
¡Es pura raza!

“Be holy in all you do,” the apostle says (1 Pet 1:15). By imitating the example of the Suffering Servant (1 Pet 2:21–23) and living a life that reflects the holiness of God, we will silence those who accuse, malign, and insult us. Moreover, Peter adds, they will see our good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us (1 Pet 2:12). Then when we are asked, By what power or what name did you do this? (Acts 4:7), we will respond like Peter: By the power and in the name of the stone rejected by men but chosen by God (Acts 4:10–11). And, as Paul writes to the Corinthians, then they will recognize the message and preaching as “a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that [their]

faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power” (1 Cor 2:4–5).

Finally, the Christology of the rejected stone addresses the question of the *goals of mission* by and among Chicanos. We preach, by words and deeds incarnated among and for the oppressed, that in Jesus of Nazareth God was pleased to dwell in all his fullness, and that through him God seeks to reconcile to himself all things by making peace through Jesus’ blood, shed on the cross (Eph 2:13–18; Col 1:19–20). The

rejected stone that has become the chief cornerstone is God's chosen abode among men and his instrument to reconcile all things to him. This is Paul's argument in Eph 2:15–22: "His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility" (2:15–16). Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection have now opened a way for God to recreate a new humanity, a *raza cosmica*, a divine mestizo race that is both Jew and Gentile.

The good news for Mexican Americans is that Latinos have an epistemological advantage: We *are* mestizos. And according to Eph 2:11–18, a mestizo is not less a human being, but what God is ultimately re-creating—a whole new man out of two (Eph 2:15). Therefore, in Christ our people are no longer *pochos* or "wetbacks"; they are no longer foreigners and aliens living in exile and ambiguity in the borderlands. They are fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household. ¡Somos familia! We are family! The chief cornerstone of this new divine household is none other than the rejected stone from Galilee. And to our surprise, he is one of us! ¡Es pura raza!

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NOTES

- 1 Virgil Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*, 2d ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000).
- 2 Fernando F. Segovia, "Hispanic American Theology and the Bible: Effective Weapon and Faithful Ally," in *We Are a People! Initiatives in Hispanic American Theology*, ed. Roberto S. Goizueta (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 35–37.
- 3 Elizondo, *Galilean Journey*, 91–102.
- 4 David J. Weber, *Foreigners in Their Native Land: Historical Roots of the Mexican Americans*, 2d ed. (Albuquerque, N. Mex.: University of New Mexico Press, 1988).
- 5 Paul Heibert, "Critical Contextualization," in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (1987): 109.
- 6 Virgil Elizondo, "Mestizaje as a Locus of Theological Reflection," in *Frontiers of Hispanic Theology in the United States*, ed. Allen Figueroa Deck (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992), 106.
- 7 Dean S. Gilliland, ed., *The Word Among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today* (Dallas: Word, 1989), 10.
- 8 Matthew Black, "The Christological Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament," in *New Testament Studies* (1971): 11.
- 9 Larry W. Hurtado, *Mark* (New International Biblical Commentary; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1989), 11.
- 10 Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).
- 11 Samuel Soliván-Román, "The Need for a North American Hispanic Theology," in *Mestizo Christianity: Theology from the Latino Perspective*, ed. Arturo J. Bañuelas (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995), 45.