Hasten, O God, to save me;  
come quickly, LORD, to help me.  
(Ps. 70:1 KJV)

In his tenth conference, John Cassian shares his continuing conversation on prayer with Abba Isaac. Isaac notes that Ps. 70:1 is “the devotional formula . . . absolutely necessary for possessing the perpetual awareness of God.” “Not without reason,” he adds, “has this verse been selected from out of the whole body of Scripture. For it takes up all the emotions that can be applied to human nature and with great correctness and accuracy it adjusts itself to every condition and every attack.” In being suitable for “all conditions” this centering prayer becomes a tool for men and women experiencing a variety of circumstances, both of need and of success. “This verse,” Isaac teaches, “should be poured out in unceasing prayer so that we may be delivered in adversity and preserved and not puffed up in prosperity.” Those who are in great need focus on hope in God, renewed by God’s promise to work on behalf of his people. Those in prosperity remember they truly do need God, refocusing on the reality of God’s presence, rather than the ephemeral state of their present successes.

The centering prayer of Ps. 70:1 is an expression of hope to help each woman and man find their way back to God’s perspective, a reality in which God seeks out all people and works to gather them together in unity. Yet, people must learn to be open to the freedom and full identity that is only found in God. Without such a renewing vision, the oppressed fall into despair. The oppressors remain lulled by their apparent power. God seeks out people even still, working in Christ and through the Spirit in this world. This liberating work of God calls the oppressed out of their oppression and the liberating
work of God calls the oppressor out of their oppressing. “Because oppression always has these two sides,” Jurgen Moltmann writes, “the liberation process has to begin on both sides too.”

BUT WHAT IS LIBERATION?

The term is popularly applied to helping those who are poor experience less alienation in society. This is certainly an important goal and worthy of continued development in theology and practice. It is not, however, the whole of its meaning. There are ways of helping people that do not change their situation, such as charity, and there are ways of helping people that perpetuates their status, as happens with paternalism. I suggest liberation is really about freedom. It involves freedom from that which constrains choice and limits expression. It involves freedom for a person or a group of people to determine how they will use their time and resources, giving them space to express their identity in full.

Liberation is thus different than charity or pursuits of justice which seek to address a particular need or to right a past wrong. These may be important elements along the way, indeed necessary, but are not themselves the fundamental expression of liberation. Those who are oppressed are often told what they must do to receive help, how they must do it; limited in their resources and constrained in their expression. They are helped but they are not liberated. Charity is offered but with certain expected behaviors or numbing bureaucracy or demanded political allegiance. A person’s life becomes about receiving the charity, performing the expected obeisance to the duly appointed authorities. Problems are addressed without an accompanying change in personal possibilities. Full liberation for the oppressed goes beyond helping immediate needs and involves changing patterns of society that allow for their free participation. Society is awakened first to the possibilities of change and then makes space in society for these changes to take shape. The oppressed become more than objects to be managed; they are recognized as persons with individual value.

I’m not saying anything new so far. Discussions about this kind of liberation are plentiful, defining a whole subset of theological discourse that illuminates how Christian theology, in particular, emphasizes freedom and participation by all. The Salvadoran theologian Ignacio Ellacuria writes, “The goal of liberation is full freedom, in which full and right relationships are possible, among people and between them and God.” This emphasis on liberation as freedom was the core of Martin Luther King Jr.’s message, as expressed in his famous 1962 speech:
And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we’re free at last!”11

Freedom, of course, is likewise a tricky proposition and an imprecise term. King defined freedom as composed of three elements.12 First, freedom is “the capacity to deliberate or weigh alternatives.” Second, freedom “expresses itself in decision.” A decision makes a choice, cutting off an alternative for the preference of the chosen path. Third, freedom involves responsibility, the ability to respond to why a choice was made, and the responsibility to respond as no one else can speak for that free person. These elements shape a wonderful ideal of freedom. We like the idea of it, the pursuit of it for others, and we definitely like our experience of it. Freedom as a lived reality is much more complicated. The trouble with freedom is how other people use their freedom, making choices we disagree with or making choices that actively undermine our choices or not taking responsibility for their choices.

For instance, I may choose to enjoy a quiet moment in my backyard, listening to the wind blowing through the trees. My neighbor may choose that same moment to mow his lawn or blow leaves from one side of his yard using very loud gas-powered tools. We both have freedom to choose, but the choice—the expression of freedom—is rarely expressed in isolation. My same neighbor may choose to put down his loud lawn equipment and enjoy a quieter moment of gardening, or reading, or smoking a fine cigar. Just at that moment, my kids decide to play in the backyard, yelling and screaming, exulting in the bounty of childhood. Expressions of freedom run head on into each other, in petty ways and in substantive ways. Herein lies the root of much division. On the surface, these are small matters indeed, but they easily fester.

Life with sharing backyards is one thing. The impact of multinational corporations controlling the natural resources of a nation and perpetuating cycles of abuse for many locals is taking it to another level.13 The rise of mass-manufacturing led to unprecedented financial freedom for some in the modern era, thus expanding freedom beyond the upper classes, yet also led to human-caused social and environmental disasters. Those with power and freedom generally use their power and freedom for their own benefit, their competing claims for what is ultimately beneficial leading to intractable political debates. This is a human reality, existing across time and in very different political and social situations—though not always in the same ways. As Joe Kapolyo reminds us in speaking about the African challenges:
Let us not forget that greed, exploitation, social and political elitism do not belong to any one social or political system. These evils are human characteristics that have the capacity to flourish under any guise. Unfortunately even the church is not immune: churches often shore up egotistical financial and political aspirations of leaders under some divine guise or other.\textsuperscript{14}

Making it even more complicated, different kinds of oppression exist in the same context, and sometimes addressing one kind involves exacerbating others. The oppressed need to be liberated from oppression but doing this almost always entails a counter-oppression, a limitation of others or flipping the society so that the powerless gain power and the powerful lose it, switching parts in the same repeated drama. Oppression exists within categories as well. The oppressed oppress other oppressed; the oppressors are oppressed by other oppressors.\textsuperscript{15} A limited freedom is thus often developed as a zero-sum game of competing interests, each trying to maximize their own experience of freedom in the context of others. We want freedom for all, on our terms. Liberation then becomes a pursuit of power.\textsuperscript{16}

The unconstrained expression of freedom driven by the mantra, “my will be done” leads to rising tensions and maybe even conflict. Constraints are applied to mitigate these, and as such constraints limit freedom they become oppressive, at least in part, at least to some. Who controls the constraints? Who decides whose freedom has priority? What kind of freedom should liberation emphasize? Freedom that is unconstrained leads to choices that often oppress others. Yet the act of constraining freedom is itself an act of oppression, asserting choices by some over the choices of others. If we say that liberation is about freedom, and freedom involves the ability to make choices, then real and thorough liberation, as Martin Luther King Jr. expresses it, is an almost impossible prospect. Because those who have the ability to choose, will choose their own freedom over and against others. For these others to express their freedom, they will need to overcome the power and control of the establishment to become the new establishment.

This assertion of power may in fact result in liberation for some of the oppressed, but it is not actually liberation for the oppressors. Rather than being liberated from oppressing, the freedom of choice is removed, restricting them. This may rightfully stop oppression and is thus sometimes necessary. However, stopping oppression is different than liberating the oppressor. Just as charity is different than liberation, and paternalism is not the same as providing freedom. Slave owners, for instance, often argued the benefits of slavery for the enslaved, as they were given food, housing, and medical care.\textsuperscript{17} Yet, that was not what the slaves themselves sought. They wanted freedom to buy their own food, live in their own houses, live life as they desired. True liberation for anyone is about their exercise of freedom, so if liberation is to
happen from the side of the oppressor, it must be truly liberating as an expression of freedom.

That then is the challenge. If we define oppressing as the ability to make choices that oppress others, then the task of liberating oppressors is not to force them to stop oppressing. Rather, a liberated oppressor is one who retains freedom, yet makes different kinds of choices in how they respond to others. Oppressors must choose to not oppress, expressing their freedom in a new way of living. In being liberated from oppressing they choose to help others, to love their neighbor as themselves. Their liberation is expressed in the act of liberating rather than restricting, the making of space for others rather than the constraining of others. Liberation must begin in this side as well as from the side of the oppressed because only in this way can we keep oppression from perpetual cycles of application and inversion. “The goal,” Moltmann emphasizes, “can be nothing other than the new and true communion of humankind, in which there are no longer oppressed or oppressors.”

How can such thorough liberation take place? In some sense, it is indeed an impossibility, as there is no reason an oppressor, someone with power, would voluntarily choose to let go their privilege and power. It’s not in human nature to do that. Yet, it happens. Men and women with power, with privilege, throughout history have chosen to let go that path and walk in other ways, often countercultural, finding a freedom of being that transcends those around them in the process. Do these unique specimens—prophets among us—live in ways that are impossible for the rest? Or have they awakened to a new way of life that points to possibilities for all of us? Is liberation a path all of us can walk, no matter our starting point? Must the rest of us linger in that liminality of guilt: leaning toward what is right but not able to ever achieve it?

WHO INDEED WILL SAVE US FROM THIS BODY OF DEATH?

This invites further discussion not only in determining whether liberation for the oppressor is possible but also how it may best take place. It is not enough to point to an ideal and say, “Do that.” This is a good way to occasionally invoke guilt or shame, while also often being ignored. It becomes a religious transaction of sorts, just enough guilt to provoke response, just enough response to alleviate guilt. There are, after all, no end of calls for transformation in our era, highlighting injustices locally and globally, arguing for better use of resources and time. Awareness has been raised. We know what the problems are, but the difficulty is in leading people to change how they address them, to become aware of them in both thought and response. We have an orthodoxy, and we point toward an orthopraxy, but need an
orthopathy—right passions and desires—in order to live out that which brings coherence to what we say we believe and know we should do.\textsuperscript{20}

Liberation of the oppressor certainly needs a goal, an awareness of what it might look like in practice, but it also requires a renewed sense of method if it is to lead people to real transformation. For some, this discussion of method might seem like I am avoiding the driving issues that threaten our well-being. Yet, ignoring method and pronouncing judgments does not generally lead to change. It leads more often to division, frustration, alienation. The experience of the fundamentalists in railing against moral depravity did not, after all, lead to moral reformation. They could help enact prohibition but they could not end the attraction to alcohol or the social dysfunction it causes. They could point out what was wrong, why it was wrong, even as less and less people listened to them. Prohibition was overturned, but was widely ignored well before that; indeed, it engendered a new kind of organized crime. The fundamentalists lacked two key elements: they did not live up to their own standards so became known as hypocrites and they could not point toward a fuller life that made rigorous moral choices seem worth the cost. They expressed guilt and shame but did not offer experienced hope because far too often it lacked a Gospel that is actual good news. As Kierkegaard reminds us, “The good, of course, signifies the restoration of freedom, redemption, salvation, or whatever one would call it.”\textsuperscript{21} People heard their preaching and did not think it was good news in either rhetoric or practice.

Guilt and shame can highlight disorders for a time, and in a committed community these may even provoke a change of behavior.\textsuperscript{22} But where trust is lacking and communities are fractured, simply highlighting how others should live their lives is more often seen as a grasp for power or empty scolding. That is our situation today. Competing factions asserting what is best for the other factions, fundamentalists with different priorities competing for power using the systems of this world. It is not enough because it simply does not work. Even if, and this is key, the statements themselves are right and should be said. The work of liberation has to be about more than scolding or invoking guilt and shame about those people who do those things and vote for that person. It must lead to a new way of living, choosing in freedom to live for others, choosing as a particular person to live in developing unity with others, accepting of their particularity. It must involve a path of love and reconciliation, so that foes become friends. Again, is this actually possible? My answer is yes. But it is not possible in our own power or as an expression of our moral will or rational discourse. It takes a broader perspective of freedom and an orientation in God’s calling for this world.

Someone with infinite possibilities can voluntarily choose limitation for the sake of others, and Christ is the source for us of becoming this kind of person in our context. It’s not a natural choice, to be sure. It’s not a determinative
result based on past experiences. Whether we are a titan of industry, in charge of multinational corporations, or a professor in a university competing for classes and recognition, we find it hard to relinquish our rights and power for the sake of broader thriving. Just as oppression became embedded in the work of the Church itself, so too does oppressing exist equally in nonprofits, and the academy, and other contexts that seek the good for others in rhetoric while oppressing them in method.\textsuperscript{23} We need to find freedom from our desire to control, relinquishing demands to feed our egos and assert our wills over others. We thus all need, every one of us, liberation.

This book is an attempt to reboot the conversation, to enter into this long-standing discussion with a theme of hope, not only hope for changing contexts but hope for the oppressors themselves. It is a strange idea that the oppressors who already have privilege need hope, but that is exactly the problem we face. In his book on John Brown, W. E. B Du Bois highlights the issue: “The price of repression is greater than the cost of liberty. The degradation of men costs something both to the degraded and those who degrade.”\textsuperscript{24} Repressing others may provide privilege in societal sense, but not necessarily real freedom, and in indulging oppression, they are cut off from the possibilities of fullness and life that is promised in Christ, both now and in eternity. The cost is hope, trust, and community, which are the cornerstones of life.

I propose a model that can more adequately define the context of oppressing, diagnose the underlying motivations and inclinations, and provide a theological analysis that gives both a Christian perspective and response. In doing this, I hope to offer a way of liberation that leads to a new pattern of life in our society, reflecting the values of the kingdom of God, one that is the task of individuals and churches to live out in their particular communities. In light of this latter goal, we discover themes that illuminate how liberation is, or should be, universal, diverse, and unifying. In expressing this more thorough understanding of liberation from both directions, the church can pursue its mission as a truly catholic church, working to actualize this liberation everywhere, in diverse situations and environments, pointing toward the Spirit of renewal that is infinitely complex and working in every setting and person, starting with each of us. As Oscar Romero reminded his listeners, “I also am a sinner and must take off my mask. I have offended God and society, and I must ask forgiveness of God. This is the call of Christ: the human person comes first.”\textsuperscript{25}

Indeed, it is the nature of personhood that is at the root of liberation. Liberation theology is concerned with the question of what it means to be human, and answers this in an expansive way. We are created in the image of God, each person is loved by the divine creator, and thus worthy of honor, respect, dignity, and equality.\textsuperscript{26} Societal status does not affect this ontological value. Sin, however, does. In wrongly conceived patterns of meaning, we can pursue
values and forms of identity that establish us in ultimately negating ways. That is, in fact, the original sin.

God continues to love us, but humanity seeks that which undermines our being. This sin is at the root of oppression and it is because of this we must talk about liberation for the oppressed and oppressors together. As Kierkegaard notes, “The bondage of sin is an unfree relation to the evil,” so both the oppressed and the oppressors lack actual freedom. The oppressed need to be liberated from oppression, and oppressors need to be liberated from oppressing, both being experiences of sin in need of salvation and renewal, a rebirth into a new way of life. Both experiences reflect the impact of structural and personal sin, so neither of these aspects can be ignored. Both experiences negate personhood, thus both require liberation into a new way of being, a renewed personhood. Borrowing Trinitarian terminology, such bi-directional liberation involves perichoresis for the oppressed, kenosis for the oppressor, each being reset into a more adequate expression of humanity in light of God’s identity and mission in the world. Each side needs freedom. The path to freedom is different for oppressed and oppressors, while the destination is the same: communion with God and each other.

In his text, God for a Secular Society, Moltmann has helpfully provided three “dimensions of human freedom,” reflecting the tensions of our life in this world as well as the possibilities for a bigger vision of life together. The first dimension is “freedom as domination,” which approaches freedom in terms of power and control. This is a dysfunctional, zero-sum, approach to freedom, in which some are free while most are not. It is a very narrow understanding of freedom indeed, and not primarily interested in thorough liberation. The second dimension is “freedom as a free community.” This dimension includes the values of friendliness and kindness rather than competition, exercising freedom as “neighborliness.” There is a cooperative sharing, giving, and receiving; trust is maintained even as people may have very different roles. In this approach to freedom, solidarity is the core theme rather than domination, “where people intervene on one another’s behalf, and especially for the weak, the sick, the young and the old.” This dimension begins the process toward liberation, though can become narrow in focus and limited in scope, even becoming defensive about changes.

The third dimension understands freedom as “the creative passion for the possible.” This is the dimension of transformation. Freedom is aligned toward the future, inviting movement that leads first toward reconciliation and then into new discoveries of human thriving. This dimension gathers the insecurities that may exist within an individual or community and rather than leading toward defensive postures or combative assertions, emphasizes the possibilities of individuals within communities. Freedom becomes defined by the acts of liberating and empowering, rather than restricting, the making
of space for others rather than the constraining of others. Freedom becomes a way of hope for all, together—an expansive solidarity between formerly oppressing and no-longer oppressed.

How does this begin? First, by identifying who are oppressed and who are oppressors. The oppressed are readily identified. Identifying an oppressor is trickier, as they tend to resist the label, justifying their actions in some way that excuses any guilt. I take a broad approach in defining them. An oppressor is someone who is defined by a multitude of choices and options, compelled to engage life as a constant competition, and uses their choices to negate others. These choices are not generally intended for the purpose of oppressing; more often, they are ways of seeking a kind of happiness. Even if not the intent, oppressing remains enacted, an effect of the kind of people we are in society. The context of choice and imposition of will remains constitutive of social identity. We expect something from others; we expect some influence over others. Ours is, after all, a society where we base someone’s value on their ability to impose their will upon others. We are offended when we are imposed upon because that is a matter of another’s will superseding our own.

Even in Christian circles, the “best” Christians are oftentimes the most influential leaders, the most charismatic speakers, the most rigorous academics. We gauge the quality of their faith on the size of the building they preach in or the amount of books they have sold, pages they have written, how much sabbatical they are given, or any number of other societally validated metrics. The best leaders even compete about who is the best servant! They don’t give up power, but frame it by how much they do for others. Of course, they set the parameters of what they do and how they do it as part of their leadership.

It is also true that oppressing happens across human society. Rather than limited to certain narrow spheres of definition, such as economics or race, it is increasingly clear that while liberation includes those categories—we can and should address issues of racism and economic oppression—it also transcends those categories. Even those who may experience oppression within one or more categories may still be utterly in need of liberating from their own definitive context of oppressing. The rich young man of Matthew 19 was, after all, a Jewish subject of an occupying, pagan culture. He, like so many of us, was caught in traps of comfort and power. Even if we are not entirely successful at either comfort or power, we swim in the sea of these values, success at which makes us acceptable as people, failure of which makes us lesser beings, possibly not really considered a person at all by others or even, sadly, by our self. Comfort and power are lures that draw us to the hook. We are given a narrative of what it means to be human and live our lives so as to fulfill these in variously defined ways, even in Christian circles where the
allure of consumerism is both preached against and indulged in, sometimes on the very same Sunday morning by the very same set of people.

Academia is certainly not immune. On the one hand, we can protest working conditions and abuse of workers in fields not our own. On the other, we overlook that a rising percentage of higher academia is being taught by adjuncts making less than a living wage. They are trapped because of their degree and the institutions that depend on such low-paid desperation to maintain a quality of life for full-time faculty and administrators. How can that change? That is the problem. It seemingly can’t. Academic institutions tend to be locked into a cycle of low-cost adjuncts teaching loan-crushed students in order to stay afloat in a system that resists easy transformation. It’s the way things are and the way things have to be, lest the whole system collapse. Adjuncts and students become cogs in a system, not real people with status and commitment given to them for who they are. Adjuncts do this, of course, with the hope of gaining a tenured position themselves, becoming a real person whose own freedom of scholarship is built on those who are being crushed.

Where is the way of life if we are all drowning in this status quo? What does it mean to be truly human in light of God’s work rather than societal affirmation? Who are the truly human among us? The way Christ himself initiated gives a definitive answer to this. That is why simply restricting the oppressor is not enough. If the system of oppressing is itself kept in place, then once such restrictions are removed, the oppressing behavior returns as soon as the oppressor can restore their power. The oppressed may become new oppressors, justified based on past oppression.

Only true liberation, a transformation within the context of freedom, will result in a fundamentally different human experience for all. As Ellacuría writes, “It is not the freedom of base instincts, but a freedom of love that places the Christian at the service of others, because the entire will of God is fulfilled in the exact fulfillment of one commandment, to love your neighbors as you love yourself (Gal. 4:13–15).” He goes on to note that it is the Spirit of Christ who accomplishes this work, particularizing each person, calling each person to a freedom that is a communal freedom where all are valued for their unique contributions.

How is it that the Spirit works? That leads the question from diagnosis to reflection. I like how Frederick Ware defines freedom as “a deep symbol of the fundamental reality of human existence” which makes the quest for freedom in sociopolitical terms “symbolic of a deeper quest for human fulfillment, as we consider our overall context of existence in the cosmos.” This reflection on the “deeper quest” reorients action, and the experience of the actions provides yet more resources for diagnosis and reflection.
stop short, we risk missing the mark altogether. Freedom for none. That is the destination of sin and death. The way of life is a way of freedom for all.

In what follows, I will develop the themes of oppressing and the pattern of liberation of the oppressor further. My goal is not to be comprehensive; that would be both too lengthy a task and indeed an impossible one since I am limited in my context and perspective. The current work is suggestive, encouraging different approaches that may move the conversations away from intractable political or religious stances. It is also an invitation, asking others in different traditions, with different expertise, in different contexts, to assess and contribute related insights. Thus, my goal is introductory rather than exhaustive, drawing from history, Scripture, and contemporary theology as a way of representing an alternative approach to this topic. The passages or figures I discuss are among the possible contributors. I actively invite an expanding conversation about how this may take fuller shape in our present world.

A second underlying goal involves arguing that oppressing is not limited to certain contexts or groups; rather, oppressing is part of human nature, and as such exists throughout society and throughout the world. Rather than emphasizing someone else’s sins, or the politics of that party, or the dysfunction of just the economically privileged, I echo Paul’s statement in Romans 2:

Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. You say, “We know that God’s judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth.” Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

Liberation of the oppressor is something we all need, because we all engage in patterns of explicit or implicit oppression; some of us just rationalize it better or shield it with lofty rhetoric. Following the lead of Jesus, the challenge for us is to first look inward at our own selves and lives, seeing how each of us engages in patterns of oppressing, and in light of that, coming to terms with who we really are and who we need to be. If we cannot address this in ourselves and our specific context, we have little business suggesting change for others, and even less influence in getting anyone to listen.

In part I, I lay the groundwork for my proposed approach, utilizing the work of Niklas Luhmann, Søren Kierkegaard, and James Loder to provide a picture of the social and psychological issues that underlie our societal tendencies. I propose their perspectives of sociology, philosophy, and psychology in
theological perspective provide a fundamental answer to the present state of human society and personhood, developing models of the situation as it is and pointing to where we might find solutions. Why does a person oppress? Is it enough to tell them it is wrong? It doesn’t seem so, given the direction of contemporary social life. What then are underlying problems that may require different kinds of solutions? “Every wound is not healed with the same treatment,” wrote Ignatius of Antioch, so we must consider both the wounds as they are and the remedies in turn.

In part II, I will engage in a retrieval of tradition. I begin with Scripture, focusing on how it addresses the liberation of oppressors within its overarching narrative. The experience of Moses, the messages of the Psalms, the event of the cross, the story of Ananias and Sapphira, Paul’s journey from oppressor to martyr, and the hymn in Philippians 2 become helpful guides for our own journeys. Following this, I will add insights from the early church, which saw the issues of wealth, power, and privilege as ever-present and crucially important to address in light of the radical call of Jesus and the Apostles. The work of Clement of Alexandria is especially instructive in addressing how we can understand the presence of wealth in our lives and society while continuing to participate within society. Anthony of Egypt provides concrete guidance from early monasticism, which, while oriented to those who have separated from society, still provides a road map of transformation for those of us with different callings.

Teachings on wealth and poverty are certainly substantial in early church writings and I am not attempting to be comprehensive in scope. My goal is to highlight a particular thread in early church writing that invites oppressors onto a new path, a thread that avoids condemning participation in society while also cautioning Christians about being co-opted by society. This approach encourages a fractal participation that emerges from below and expresses what Alan Kreider calls “the patient ferment of the early church.”

In part III, I make a constructive turn. Liberation for the oppressor involves highlighting the way of hope, what is gained in fullness of life and openness to community. Such a hope involves the deployment of a more adequately holistic theology, one that is simultaneously grounded in orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy. Liberation involves a set of doctrines about God and the world; it also involves action, expressing what we know in our context by how we live our lives. What we know and what we do is intimately connected to our inner self—our emotions, our passions, our desires—and if we do not address this side of the human experience we become easily distracted or discouraged, co-opted back into patterns of oppressing. In light of this, the path to liberation involves more than an identification about current issues and actions we should take to solve them. Calling these out may seem prophetic
in part, but it tends to be more preaching to a particular choir than enacting transformation in the streets.

Instead of jumping straight to the end—what must we do—we must first address issues of understanding about who God is and who we are in light of God’s mission in this world. We must go back to the beginning of our assumptions about God and God’s work in this world. Orthopraxy is important, but we should also involve orthodoxy and orthopathy in triangulating a better way of life. Ignoring these latter elements—or just one—results in being co-opted by other dogmas, and thus expressing that narrative rather than the narrative of Christ.

In chapters 8 and 9, I will focus on our concept of God. Our understanding of ultimate authority is mirrored in our conception of representative authority. How we understand God affects how we represent God to this world, and thus how we live in this world in light of God’s identity and purposes. While oppression has many causes, oppression that arises in particularly Christian settings seems to reflect a prevailing understanding about God. If we conceive God in oppressive ways, we establish oppression in our contexts. If we conceive God in liberative ways, we establish liberation in our contexts. If God is defined by judgment, we emphasize judgment. If God is defined by hope and invitation, we express an inviting hope. I argue the way of God is a way of hope. Understanding this hope in our context involves a revision of our theology, before we can begin any other stage of liberation.46

In chapter 10, I build on this understanding and mission of God to point to the particular method of God illustrated in the work of Christ. This orients the discussion in terms of method, which cannot be separated from goals. Christianity, after all, is a way in this world, not simply a set of beliefs about it. The way of Christ for us involves living out a distinct story in the midst of the world, and this story depends on a particular view of reality. This way involves the cross and the resurrection together, a hope for renewal that begins in radical obedience played out in particular contexts. The resurrection teaches that transformation literally and metaphorically emerges from below, rising to encompass all that is.

In chapter 11, I expand on what this renewal means in light of God’s plan in and for this world. The particular emphases of the Kingdom provide an orientation for liberated freedom. While this is a big picture perspective in part, it takes on more concrete expression in the experience of community, which I focus on in chapter 12. Liberation takes shape in our Christian communities so that we are not simply preaching about liberation to others, we are living within a field of liberation in our lives, a resonating transformation that displays what is possible through the work of the Spirit within this world. Such is not limited to isolated Christian communities but extends as transformed
people live transformed lives within the contours of established society, living by a new set of rules in the midst of the established game.

In these constructive chapters, I draw from four theologians in particular. Each is a substantive contributor to theological discourse in our era and each points toward renewal in both theology and practice in productive ways. Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann provide a starting point in their theologies of hope that relates to a renewal of human identity. Pannenberg illuminates the goal, a transformative vision of holiness in renewed identity—exocentric in orientation and reflective of the triune being of God as the ground of being. Moltmann offers a more explicit consideration of contextual liberation: what does such a holiness mean for our assumptions and responses? With this, Sarah Coakley provides an example of a renewed approach to theology that in many ways expresses an embrace of diversity within its liberating emphasis on the work of the triune God through the holistic pattern of contemplative practice. Moltmann and Coakley serve especially as guides in orthopathy, orienting liberation in light of the fruit of the Spirit. They understand how the psychological and emotional experience of theology is as important for transformation as is reason and debate. Early monastic discussions emphasized this issue of “right passions” but it has been often left out of contemporary examinations.

Jean Vanier, founder of the L’Arche communities, offers a substantive example of liberation of the oppressor in his own life, showing theological reflection applied in practice that then provokes continued reflection and revision. For Vanier, orthopathy leads directly into orthopraxy. As he focuses on themes of becoming human, he prioritizes love and friendship in the context of a voluntary kenosis. Different passions can result in similar actions, but the particular passions shape how these actions are developed and the results that are pursued. In actions developed from love and peace, people let go oppressing because they discover something more profound in being open to the other, relating to the oppressed and shedding the cultural insistence on domination and control. This, I argue, needs to be taken up more thoroughly by the church in a variety of different ways and contexts, transforming it from a bastion of power to being a “community of becoming” for oppressed and oppressors together. Indeed, this is a theologically and scripturally substantive approach and so should be assessed in light of such.

In the concluding chapter, I draw together the various strands and point to a transformative move of hope and love that is initiated in a fully realized faith in the liberating God. We are liberated when we participate with each other in becoming fully who we are each made to be. We liberate when we help others become; we are liberated when we let others participate in our becoming. This is true freedom, a freedom that includes and invites, expanding the experience of humanity in particular contexts. Liberation into this
kind of freedom happens for the oppressed and the oppressors together, the one taking up as the other lets go, each creating space for the other, resisting the depersonalizing tendencies of social systems as they engage in the truly personalizing movement of the Holy Spirit in their midst.

I begin this project with the contention that the systems in our society engender rather than mitigate oppressing. This involves the economic system but goes beyond that to involve the legal system, the political system, the education system, and the religious system. Even when our stated goals may seek something different, oppressing is incorporated and often even justified as being part of a perceived solution that never quite arrives. It sneaks its way back in, even in those places that purport to fight against it. Oppression is an insidious temptation, offering a fruit in exchange for wisdom about good and evil yet leading always to death. In a culture that has a long-standing Christian tradition, we cannot blame outside forces for our dysfunction. We cannot blame the snake. It is our responsibility when we listen to bad counsel.

This is the continuing temptation we face. We are still, quite literally, creating habits of consumerism and competition that are modeled after dysfunctional ecclesial habits and teachings, though unintentionally. Having more “stuff” to show off to the surrounding world and attract more people is as much a church addiction as it is a personal one. As such, it is not enough to treat symptoms. The disease has infected our deepest parts. People who engage in oppression are reflecting the systems they are in, not generally making independent choices to oppress others. We must thus look at underlying dysfunction and treat the disease itself. My argument, which will take place in this text, is that theology (especially our doctrines of God, humanity, and the church) has oriented us into our current situation. We are living in one orientation but trying to convince ourselves to live out another. But it is impossible to go south and north at the same time. To be free, we must address these contradictory trajectories, and then and only then, can we shape people who live out their Christian life in transformative, liberating ways in which oppressors and oppressed find thorough and lasting community. That lasting community is the hope offered to all.

Especially relevant to this project, then, are the words of Henry David Thoreau:

I do not mean to prescribe rules to strong and valiant natures, who will mind their own affairs whether in heaven or hell, and perchance build more magnificently and spend more lavishly than the richest, without ever impoverishing themselves, not knowing how they live if, indeed, there are any such, as has been dreamed; nor to those who find their encouragement and inspiration in precisely the present condition of things, and cherish it with the fondness and enthusiasm of lovers and, to some extent, I reckon myself in this number; I do
not speak to those who are well employed, in whatever circumstances, and they
know whether they are well employed or not but mainly to the mass of men
who are discontented, and idly complaining of the hardness of their lot or of
the times, when they might improve them. There are some who complain most
energetically and inconsolably of any, because they are, as they say, doing their
duty. I also have in my mind that seemingly wealthy, but most terribly impov-
erished class of all, who have accumulated dross, but know not how to use it, or
get rid of it, and thus have forged their own golden or silver fetters.48

NOTES

1. Or, at least, his stylized retelling of desert monastic theology in the form of
(New York: Paulist Press, 1997).
5. Though this is expressed in different ways. God’s seeking after the poor,
including them within his valued people, often involves God’s calling the rich and
powerful to let go their wealth and control. God’s seeking after people, his option for
call, comes some to rise up and some to let go. The trouble with much of Christian his-
tory is that the church often confused which method to apply to which group, calling
the poor to let go and the rich to take up, securing the established power structures of
the current political climate. This is why it is important to emphasize God’s preferen-
tial option to the poor, because that is the message counter to much of the world’s
assumptions. However, this is not exclusive. Gustavo Gutiérrez writes: “The very
word ‘preference’ denies all exclusiveness and seeks rather to call attention to those
who are the first—though not the only ones—with whom we should be in solidar-
ity. . . . I insisted that the great challenge was to maintain both the universality of
God’s love and God’s predilection for those on the lowest rung of the ladder of his-
tory. To focus exclusively on the one or the other is to mutilate the Christian message.
Therefore every attempt at such an exclusive emphasis must be rejected.” In Gustavo
Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 15th Anniversary edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis
6. Jürgen Moltmann, Experiences in Theology, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapo-
7. On this, see Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner, Liberating Exegesis: The
Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies (Louisville: Westminster John
29 in The Souls of Black Folk: With “The Talented Tenth” and “The Souls of White
8. See, for instance, Jack London, The People of the Abyss (New York: Macmil-
lan, 1903), chap. 8.
9. For early accounts of Latin American liberation theology, see two key books
by Bartolomé de las Casas, Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies (New
York: Penguin Classics, 2004), first published in 1552, and In Defense of the Indians (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974). In our era, Gustavo Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation is often considered the founding text, though he was certainly not alone in these discussions and there have been many written since. For the crucial conclusions of the gathering of Latin American bishops, see Louis M. Colonnese, ed., The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council, 2 vols. (Bogota: General Secretariat of CELAM, 1970). See also John Eagleson and Philip J. Schaper, eds., Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979).


13. One of the most heartbreaking pictures I’ve seen recently was a photo of a man staring at the severed foot and hand of his daughter, who was punished because he did not meet his quota at a rubber plantation owned by Leopold II. See “Father stares at the hand and foot of his five-year-old, severed as a punishment for failing to make the daily rubber quota, Belgian Congo, 1904,” Rare Historical Photos, September 21, 2016, https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/father-hand-belgian-congo-1904/. The degree of one man’s assertion of his power over the lives of others is overwhelming in its obscenity, and it is only one example among the myriad in history and the present.


19. For this reason, the dominant view among liberation theologians is that liberation of the oppressor can only happen by means of the oppressed. Virgilio Elizondo notes, “It is the Christian poor of today’s world that will bring salvation to the Christians of the rich nations of the world, who because of the material wealth of their own nations are too blind to see the truth of the gospel.” Virgilio P. Elizondo, foreword to Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective, ed. Justo L. González (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 13–14.

20. On these categories, especially the less common one of orthopathy, see Theodore Runyon, The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), chap. 5. Clement of Alexandria writes, “The Instructor being practical, not theoretical, His aim is thus to improve the soul, not to teach, and to train
it up to a virtuous, not to an intellectual life. Although this same word is didactic,
but not in the present instance. For the word which, in matters of doctrine, explains
and reveals, is that whose province it is to teach. But our Educators being practical,
first exhorts to the attainment of right dispositions and character, and then persuades
us to the energetic practice of our duties, enjoining on us pure commandments, and
exhibiting to such as come after representations of those who formerly wandered in
error. Both are of the highest utility—that which assumes the form of counselling
to obedience, and that which is presented in the form of example; which latter is of
two kinds, corresponding to the former duality—the one having for its purpose that
we should choose and imitate the good, and the other that we should reject and turn
away from the opposite. Hence accordingly ensues the healing of our passions, in
consequence of the assuagements of those examples; the Paedagogue strengthening
our souls, and by His benign commands, as by gentle medicines, guiding the sick to
the perfect knowledge of the truth.” In Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogy*, trans.


23. This is not to say all churches, or all nonprofits, or the entire academy is
oppressive. More that oppression exists, and may even predominate in some contexts.
Such oppression stands out not because it is necessarily greater but because it exists
where the rhetoric is about freedom from such oppression by others. On the debate
about international aid efforts see, for instance, Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why Aid
Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa* (New York: Farrar, Straus
and Giroux, 2009); Gary A. Haugen and Victor Boutros, *The Locust Effect: Why the
End of Poverty Requires the End of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press,
2015); Jeffrey Sachs, *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time* (New
York: Penguin Press, 2005). For one of the more thorough discussions of the history
of Christianity in Africa, see Ogbu U. Kalu, ed., *Africa Christianity: An African
Story* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007). This is especially noteworthy as all
the contributors are themselves African, thus it is truly an African expression of their
own history and understanding. See also Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity:
The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Mod-
ern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 1999). In regard to the academy, Richard Moser has
recently written, “The increasing exploitation of contingent faculty members is one
dimension of an employment strategy sometimes called the ‘two-tiered’ or ‘multi-
tiered’ labor system. This new labor system is firmly established in higher education
and constitutes a threat to the teaching profession. If left unchecked, it will under-
mine the university’s status as an institution of higher learning because the overuse
of adjuncts and their lowly status and compensation institutionalize disincentives to
quality education, threaten academic freedom and shared governance, and disqualify
the campus as an exemplar of democratic values. These developments in academic
labor are the most troubling expressions of the so-called corporatization of higher
education.” See Richard Moser, “Overuse and Abuse of Adjunct Faculty Members


31. Ibid., 159.


33. Indeed, in a recent study, number eight on the list of careers with the most psychopaths was “clergy.” See Kevin Dutton, *The Wisdom of Psychopaths* (New York: Scientific American, 2012), 162. Dutton, interestingly, does not see psychopathy as inherently a problem, indeed his text explores the idea of psychopathy as a potential “medicine for modern times” and taking it in moderation might be useful for success. The definition of success is, of course, a key element here. It certainly can lead to popularity, advancement, and recognition. One of the “leaders” of the recent Emergent church movement is a diagnosed narcissist, leading to a seeming divergent expression of life in public and private. This reality is, no doubt, also found in academia and theological studies. As Dutton, 163 asks could “twiddling those dials a little to the right on our respective psychopath mixing desks—at certain times, in certain specific context—actually be good for us?” The stories of how theologians, ministers, and other representatives of Christ have treated wives, other women, or many of those near them suggests that the answer, for reputation and profession, is yes. Indeed, it seems the case that oppressing is embedded in much Christian theology and so the challenge is to see how much Christian theology reflects the rationalizations of such psychopathic tendencies.

34. Ellacuría, *Ignacio Ellacuría*, 244 writes, “Certainly there are other forms of oppression besides the sociopolitical and economic, and not all forms of oppression derive exclusively and immediately from that one. Christians would be wrong, therefore, to seek only one type of social liberation. Liberation must extend to everyone who is oppressed by sin and by the roots of sin.”

35. In seminary education, accreditation requires at least 30 percent of courses be taught by regular faculty. That means 70 percent of the courses offered may be taught by those who have no vote, little recognition. Many have to carry a heavy teaching load or a heavy alternative workload simply to survive so they do not have time to
keep up scholarship, thus falling further behind. A student could conceivably get an entire degree without taking one class from a tenured or tenure-track faculty at some institutions.

36. The term “community” is often utilized in higher education, but it is very much a pay-to-play system, where community is accessible as long as the payment is received.


40. John Wesley in his sermon “Original Sin” notes the increasing idealism about human nature among writers of his time, and how popular this line of thinking is for those in his time: “So that it is now quite unfashionable to talk another wise, to say anything to the disparagement of human nature; which is generally allowed, notwithstanding a few infirmities, to be very innocent and wise and virtuous. But in the meantime, what must we do with our Bibles? For they will never agree with this. These accounts, however pleasing to flesh and blood, are utterly irreconcilable with the scriptural.” See John Wesley, Sermon 44, “Original Sin,” in The Sermons of John Wesley, eds. Kenneth J. Collins and Jason E. Vickers (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 12.

41. See Romans 2:1–16.

42. See Kierkegaard, Concept of Anxiety, 138.


44. Paul introduces the Philippians hymn with the words, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” thus directly relating what follows to an admonition for our own behavior and identity.

45. Kreider, The Patient Ferment of the Early Church, 12. He writes that “God used not influential or powerful people but obscure fishers and hunters to achieve a huge end. . . . The churches grew in many places, taking varied forms. They proliferated because the faith that these fishers and hunters embodied was attractive to people who were dissatisfied with their old cultural and religious habits, who felt pushed to explore new possibilities, and who then encountered Christians who embodied a new manner of life that pulled them toward what the Christians called ‘rebirth’ into a new life. Surprisingly, this happened in a patient manner.”

46. Indeed, I think it is a fair argument that the rise of atheism in our era comes more from the distorted expression of a dysfunctional theology than a direct rejection of a faithful presentation of God in the lives of those who claim to be in God’s service.

47. See Harvey Cox, On Not Leaving it to the Snake (New York: Macmillan, 1969), xv–xvi. In writing about Adam and Eve he notes, “Their sin is our sin. It is not promethean. We do not defy the gods by courageously stealing the fire from the celestial hearth, thus bringing benefit to man. Nothing so heroic. We fritter away our destiny by letting some snake tell us what to do.”