

CHAPTER 1

RISKY BUSINESS

Background essay

Tom Wilkens

The piece that follows, titled “Risky business,” did not originate as an article published to popularize important developments in the global church, although this later became one of its purposes. It began rather as an exercise in liturgical desperation. Late one Saturday evening in January of 1983, I received a phone call from our campus pastor. He was ill, he said, and could not lead the campus congregation’s worship in the morning. He asked me to fill in for him and I agreed to do so. But I had no sermon or homily prepared and no real “barrel” or file from which to draw an older homily that could be revised and reused.

Consequently I based my homily the next morning on something that I, as a professor, could quite quickly prepare: an exam. I was at the time teaching a course on liberation theology. So I wrote a test, made copies, and distributed them at the beginning of the homily period. After giving the congregants time to take and score the exam, I then elaborated the meaning of their answers in light of themes and developments in liberation theology. It seemed to work: in addition to gracious compliments, I got some expressions of consternation at the end of the service. Perhaps the old adage that preaching should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable applied in this instance.

Certain expressions of liberation theology, especially those arising out of Latin American environments, hold not only that there are intimate connections among liturgy, theology, and life but also that these connections are essential to the integrity of Christianity. Theology that is not

rooted in liturgy and liturgy that is not rooted in life — the whole of life — are fraudulent. The older I get, the more I agree. Most of the occasions in which my theological perspective has come into sharper and more relevant focus have been times when I was preparing to preach; that is, when I was attempting to connect liturgy, theology, and life. Such occasions were not that frequent, yet this factor in itself gave me the opportunity each time to listen, to see, and to hone the message and interpret the mission in some detail and with some precision. It was at those points that my own theological formation received its most definitive expression.

It had become evident to me by this time that while I had some insight into the phenomenon of liberation theology — or, more accurately, the phenomena of liberation theologies — I was not in a position to understand or appreciate them in much more than a superficial, theoretical way. I needed to become a part of the actual life settings out of which these movements were arising. I was particularly interested in Latin American liberation theology. I had already set in motion a process to learn Spanish and to experience firsthand those communities in which liberation theology was taking shape. I would go to Cuernavaca, Mexico, in the summer of 1983 to do language study and there, through the good offices of the Augsburg House that was affiliated with the Center for Global Education program of Augsburg College in Minneapolis, gain some access to base Christian communities so central to Latin American liberation theology. This was for me the first of several transforming experiences over the next 25 years.

Prior to all of this, I had begun to organize a symposium dedicated to highlighting key voices of liberation theology: voices from black theology, feminist theology, Mexican-American liberation theology, and Latin American liberation theology. I titled the symposium “Liberation: Common Hope in a Complex Hemisphere.” All of the people mentioned in the following article — James Cone, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Virgilio Elizondo, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and Jon Sobrino — agreed to participate, though Gutiérrez was at the last moment prevented from leaving his home country of Peru. Sponsored by Texas Lutheran, the three-day event in February of 1984 drew a large audience of people from across the state and nation as well as from the ranks of the student body, faculty, and administration. On campus, at any rate, I became identified with the voices of liberation. I was not averse to that identification.

Liberation theology is celebrating its fortieth birthday. It continues to change, to evolve, and to precipitate controversy. In the meantime, there is this new kid on the block: another way of understanding the faith, of living as disciples, of dealing with Christian tradition, of functioning as church. As a movement in the world, it is called postmodernism. As a movement in the community of Christ, it is often called the Emerging Church. Kim and I will comment on these developments as we continue to elaborate our postmodern and modern pilgrimages and perspectives.

It turns out that one of the North American expressions of liberation theology, black theology, was freshly relevant in the recent US presidential primary season. James Cone, mentioned in the article that follows and one of the key founders of the black theology movement, has had a significant influence on many black Christian communities and people — including the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, former pastor to Barack Obama.

Cone's theology contains intense anger: anger with the history of injustice that whites have visited upon blacks, and anger with modern black collusion with that injustice. His message was, and still is, a strong countercultural call to confront the injustice and to find a course for black participation in American life in more just, less destructive ways. Cone's rhetoric is filled with hyperbole: he often overstates his social and political diagnoses and prescriptions. Such exaggeration is not uncommon among prophets and reformers, including Martin Luther, the founder of the Christian stream in which I currently swim.

Pastor Wright reads the works of James Cone and is thereby mentored by Cone. Wright clearly does not want to be counted among the blacks who collude with white racism. Obama had been mentored by Pastor Wright, but found himself in disagreement with Wright's more contentious and divisive views.

I understand Obama's dilemma. I have a similar relationship with Luther. For the most part I agree with his perspective, but I find that I must distance myself from certain of his excesses — such as his inflammatory and ultimately deadly condemnation of the hurting, rebellious peasants in the south of Germany in 1525 and the increasingly vitriolic anti-Semitism of his later years. Still, the things Luther got wrong do not invalidate the larger number of things he got right and do not set him beyond the pale of either the Christian or the human community. It may

not be possible to be countercultural, at least not countercultural in a manner that actually awakens and energizes people, without occasionally going “over the top” in ways that are inappropriate and at times harmful. If we require perfect mentors, we will have no mentors. At their imperfect best, mentors help to create critical people, not uncritical protégés.

Risky business¹

Tom Wilkens

It’s test time. You’ve had no warning, but that’s okay. Your answers will not depend on study. For each question you must choose between two alternatives — even if you agree or disagree with both — by circling either 1 or 2. This is not a scientifically designed exam. If you answer honestly, though, you may learn something about yourself and your faith.

- A. Which title for Jesus is more important to understanding his identity and mission?
 - 1. Servant of God
 - 2. Savior of humankind
- B. Which description of the Christian message is more basic to comprehending its primary function and effect?
 - 1. Subvert what is negative, destructive, and dehumanizing in life
 - 2. Affirm what is positive, true, good, and beautiful in life
- C. Which phrase is more fundamental to what it means to be a Christian?
 - 1. Following Jesus as a disciple
 - 2. Knowing Jesus as the Redeemer
- D. Which practice is more necessary for becoming and remaining faithful children of God?
 - 1. Solidarity with the poor through sacrificial living in the world
 - 2. Solidarity with the saints through sacramental worship in the church
- E. Which way of helping others is more in tune with an authentic expression of Christian love?
 - 1. Liberation of people through revolutionary change of social, political, and economic structures

2. Alleviation of people's suffering through careful redevelopment of social, political, and economic structures

Score: ____ (Add the numbers you have circled. The lowest possible score is 5; the highest, 10.)

How did you score?

A total of 9 or 10 probably indicates that you are in the mainstream of US Christianity. You have much company, hence a great deal of reinforcement for your views. A score of 5 or 6 could mean that you hear a different drummer. The beat might be coming from Latin America. A score of 7 or 8 may show some ambivalence, an in-between position not unknown among Lutherans. From this point on I want to challenge those of you who scored 9 or 10, comfort those who scored 5 or 6, and provide some clarification for those who scored 7 or 8.

For each question of the quiz, A through E, liberation theologians generally would choose the first answer. Liberation theology is a complex movement that includes advocates in North America who are black, feminist, Native American, and Mexican-American. Many of them, Mexican-American theologians in particular, have their roots in what may be the most challenging and creative theological movement of our day — Latin American liberation theology.

North American Christians need to take seriously the new vision of Christian life and faith being articulated by their sisters and brothers in Latin America and by a growing minority in North America. Using the pop quiz as a point of departure, here in broad outline is the challenge of liberation theology.

Question A: The identity and mission of Jesus

Liberation theology criticizes the conventional descriptions of Christ. North Americans frequently view him from a self-centered, self-serving perspective. The expression “Jesus is my personal Savior” is one example.

Jesus is the Savior; liberation theology doesn't deny that. But Jesus is one who saves by having become the Servant of God — powerless, abandoned, oppressed, and crucified. So to discover the Savior, believers first must see the Servant. And if they want to see the Servant, they must look to people who are poor, powerless, exploited, starving, and dying.

Jesus said clearly that such people would always be in the community. He also insisted and demonstrated by his life that it is precisely through the poor that he is with the faithful. Liberation theologians, Jon Sobrino among them, argue that if believers don't relate to Jesus as Servant first, they can't relate to him as Savior.

Question B: The primary function and effect of the Christian message

Liberation theology criticizes conventional descriptions of the Christian message. North American Christians often have superficial and "triumphalist" notions of the gospel. These notions range from possibility thinking to thoughtless obsession with success. North American Christians thus become unchastened Pollyannas — blindly optimistic.

Liberation theology maintains that the primary function of the Christian message is subversion, not support. The authentic Christian message subverts all the comfortable, common-sense, optimistic ideas about North Americans and the world. It subverts their easy-going, unquestioning participation in a world whose institutions and structures dehumanize and sometimes destroy people and cultures. If North American Christians truly hear this message, says feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Reuther in *New Woman/New Earth*, they will become angry opponents of oppression.

The strange logic of the Christian message is that it affirms subversion. It supports efforts to undo the injustices, often rooted in "the system," that are rampant in the world. The challenge of faith is not the challenge of counting enough blessings to be able to believe in God. The challenge of faith is to believe in God *despite* so much evil and suffering in the world, and then to join in doing something about it.

Question C: What it means to be a Christian

Liberation theology criticizes conventional thinking about what it means to be a Christian. North American Christians seem to want what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." They want the crown, thank you, but not the cross. They want the Holy Grail, but not the pilgrimage.

Liberation theology insists that the only way to know Jesus as Redeemer is to follow Jesus as disciple. And liberation theologians remind Christians that the Jesus believers are called to follow is the Servant. He befriends the alienated, sides with the oppressed, and even

consorts with subversives.

Jesus doesn't offer an "all's well" peace of mind; he calls the faithful to material action. Black theologian, James Cone, describes the ministry of most US churches as "a chaplaincy to middle-class egos." That does not sound much like the ministry of Jesus, nor does it sound much like the apostle Paul's admonition to work out salvation. Paul's program sounds more like discipleship, more like following the Servant-Redeemer. Jesus does play favorites: he favors the poor and oppressed of the world.

Question D: On becoming and remaining faithful children of God

Liberation theology criticizes conventional Christian priorities. North American Christians' emphasis on corporate worship can be a cop-out — an alternative to concrete discipleship.

Worship is not a substitute for service. Quite literally, worship means service. In days of old, God clearly took no delight in the aroma of burnt offerings from the rituals of haughty, self-righteous, unjust people. Today, liberation theology suggests that God still derives no pleasure from words unaccompanied by deeds.

Solidarity with the poor through sacrificial living must be the basis for meaningful worship. So says Latin American theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez. Solidarity with the saints must be solidarity with their discipleship — their reaching out to the poor, their reliance on the poor, their own experience of poverty. Sharing in the Eucharist is an act of courage: it identifies believers with generations of God's servant people.

Question E: Authentic Christian love

Liberation theology criticizes conventional Christian expressions of love. North American believers are viewed, to a large extent, as *laissez-faire* Christians. Their love tends to be timid and benign, even patronizing at times. They often seek to dispense welfare to suffering humanity without rocking the social, political, and economic boats. They frequently ignore injustices built into the system, what Mexican-American theologian Vergilio Elizondo calls "structural oppression."

Christians are called to be bold lovers. They are called to love as revolutionaries. Their goals must be high, even utopian — not merely to alleviate the symptoms of suffering, but to liberate people from oppressive structures and stereotypes.

Faith active in love is risky business, yet it is the chief business of Christians. The magnificent paradox of Christianity is that those saved — the safe and secure ones — must be prepared to take risks that endanger reputation, career, and even life itself. Do you dare to be like Daniel, or like César Chávez?

Challenging vision

The vision of liberation theology is powerful and challenging. The challenge takes two shapes, the second more threatening.

First, liberation theology at the very least challenges the maturity of conventional North American Christians, who are likened to the early Corinthian Christians whom the apostle Paul called milk drinkers. He wanted to wean them off milk and onto a diet of meat.

Are they immature? Are North Americans chronically adolescent Christians, unable to handle an adult gospel or incapable of translating the gospel so it speaks to the harsh realities of the world?

Second, and far more devastating, liberation theology challenges the very authenticity of conventional North American Christianity. That challenge goes beyond simply creating a crisis of guilt over wasteful, self-indulgent ways. It should lead to a crisis of doubt, calling into question the core and essence of faith and life.

North American Christians need to face up to this new challenge from the Third World, especially because part of the Third World is in their backyard. If they do face up to the challenge, it could be an opportunity for rebirth. Martin Luther, who recommended daily rebirth for Christians, would have liked that.

Is liberation theology Lutheran? No, it crosses denominational borders. But Lutherans have been taught to raise a more basic question: is liberation theology evangelical, faithful to the biblical witness? What do you think and why? The test, it seems, has just begun.

Response: What's your worldview?

Kim Wilkens

Test time — uh, oh. I haven't even studied. Now you should know that I actually went to Texas Lutheran College (TLC) from 1983 to 1987. And yes, I had to take theology courses from my dad. I even dropped one of his courses once, because I knew I wasn't going to make an "A": I did not have time to study or some such excuse.

So, here I am traveling down memory lane to my college days. I'm trying to determine how I would have responded to this test in that former life. I was probably even at TLC when my dad delivered his "Risky Business" message at the school chapel, but I certainly wasn't in attendance. I didn't have time for chapel. You see, after high school I had had enough of organized religion. I felt it had too much hypocrisy, too much oppression, and too much sexism. Going to church just made me mad and sad. Ironically, at TLC I got exposed to all sorts of worthy religions and philosophies from around the world and came away utterly disenchanted with the Christianity I knew.

In my former life of college student, I would have found the quiz irrelevant to my life. And unfortunately, even if I had been paying attention, I don't think I would have understood the radical notions my dad was raising: solidarity with the poor instead of just lip service, liberation through revolutionary change instead of oppression, subverting what is dehumanizing in life instead of just affirming the good. He was challenging the very things I was fed up with in organized religion. I finally took the test today — and guess what? — I scored a five.

Where does that leave me now, almost twenty years later? I find myself on a spiritual journey. It began with the birth of my son or rather with his almost premature birth. It was at that point in my life that I finally realized I am not in control. I'm still often in denial about that lack of control, but I'm constantly reminded of the truth of it. I also wanted my son to have connectedness to a community with values that I shared. I remember having that connectedness in my church growing up. I wanted to be part of a community that could help answer the "big" questions.

I have returned to a church community and along the way I find myself returning to Christianity. How can I really be a part of a Christian community with so many questions and doubts, when I'm not even certain that I am a Christian? I realize now that this has been the biggest stumbling block for me to get involved in church for a very long time. Even now, when I go to church, I often feel like an outsider and that everyone else there is "getting it" while I don't.

On my spiritual journey, I am learning to be uncomfortable. I'm also learning why being a follower of Christ is risky business. In 2004, at the Ginghamburg Change Conference, I heard about worldviews from Mike Slaughter, lead pastor at Ginghamburg Church. His definition of a worldview "is a set of fundamental beliefs that determine primary life values, decisions and actions" and that "faith is not about your belief, it's about your worldview." He goes on to identify three major worldviews: secular, soft-secular, and Christian.

Secular folks are totally skeptical of anything supernatural and act as if there is no God. They see belief in the supernatural as a barrier to social progress. Human beings need to depend on themselves to create their own meaning and destiny.

Soft-secular folks believe in God, but God is a secondary value or belief. They confess Jesus, but they trust the values of secular culture. While they believe in God, they still put their trust in themselves and material possessions to provide meaning rather than God's promise.

Christian worldview says it's bigger than my life. Truth will work and prevail because it is true, but it may not prevail in my lifetime. As a matter of fact, living for truth may cost me my life. It's not about me, my wants, my passion, my needs; it's about God's greater purpose.²

I've had the secular view, but it doesn't seem to be working for me anymore. I've had the soft-secular view, but it doesn't feel right. It seems hypocritical and it's not enough. I am intrigued by the Christian view. It seems like the right way to live, but it also seems very challenging, very risky.

So here is my quiz for you³ — what's your worldview?

Question	Secular	Soft-secular	Christian
How should your enemies be treated?	I'll retaliate and get even	I'll forgive if...	I'll forgive and pray
On whom should you rely?	I am self-reliant	I believe in God, but trust myself	I'll trust God
How can I follow Jesus?	Why follow— religion is a crutch	I'll fit Jesus into my agenda	I'll be shaped by Jesus' agenda
How should I serve others?	It's all about me	I'll decide where, when, how, and whom to serve	I'll be a servant
What is life all about?	Being successful	Doing good deeds and feeling good about myself	Making a difference

-
1. "Risky business," *The Lutheran Standard* (August 10, 1984), 8-10. Published subsequently as "The risk of loving boldly," *The Lutheran* (October 3, 1984), 12-14. This article was used as background reading for participants in travel seminars sponsored by the Center for Global Education (see ch. 3).
 2. Mike Slaughter, *The great requirement*, 2004 Ginghamburg Change Conference, October 7, 2004.
 3. Pastor John Herman, based on a message delivered at Peace Lutheran Church, Charlottesville, VA, November 20, 2004.