

## **Scripture and Liberating Ethics: Honoring Eldin Villafañe**

Efraín Agosto  
New York Theological Seminary  
*New York, New York*

### *Introduction: Some Personal Notes*

In 1989, when I was a graduate student, I was pleased to be part of a group of Latino/a theologians, among them established scholars Fernando Segovia, Francisco Garcia-Treto, Ada María Isasi Díaz, and Eldin Villafañe, as they worked to establish La Comunidad of Hispanic Scholars of Religion. At that time, while completing a Ph.D. in New Testament Studies, I was on staff at the Center for Urban Ministerial Education (CUME) in Boston, which Dr. Villafañe directed. This founding meeting of La Comunidad took place at the Annual Meetings of the American Academy of Religion and Society for Biblical Literature in Anaheim, California. La Comunidad was the first organization established on behalf of advocacy for Latinx scholars in the AAR and the SBL. By the end of the meeting, Villafañe was named as the organization's first President and a year later, he delivered the first presidential address, which I will discuss later in this essay.

By 1989, Eldin Villafañe was well known as an activist scholar and the founding director of a groundbreaking urban ministry theological education center in Boston under the auspices of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. A few years later he published his seminal book, *The Liberating Spirit: Toward An Hispanic American Pentecostal Social Ethic*, in which he argued that Latino/a Pentecostalism, in all its complexity, needed to be understood as a Spirit-led, prophetic social justice

movement, particularly in urban settings.<sup>1</sup> Throughout this work and subsequent books and essays that Villafañe produced, his was a thoroughgoing biblical approach to constructing a Latino/a social ethic. In what follows, I would like to outline some examples of that biblical approach to show the connections between biblical studies and theological/ethical construction in many scholarly Latinx efforts today.

*Sample Biblical Exegesis by Villafañe  
in the Formation of His Social Ethic*

First, I would like to offer some examples of how Villafañe engages specific biblical texts in arguing for social ethical theology and action by both individuals and especially institutions, be they seminaries or faith communities. In a work from 2006, *Beyond Cheap Grace: A Call to Radical Discipleship, Incarnation and Justice*, based on lectures at Fuller Seminary, Villafañe does a thorough study of the Apostle Paul's Letter to the Philippians, one of his, and my, favorites in which he posits that having "the mindset of Christ" is foundational to Christian discipleship. Villafañe unpacks in particular Philippians 2:4-11, in which Paul theologizes that Christ "emptied himself" from glory for the good of humanity, indeed to the point of service and sacrifice, two themes that consistently resound in Villafañe's social ethic. Based on his exegesis of Philippians, Villafañe calls for a "costly discipleship," which he describes this way: "The world looks at the church and wants to see in our lives the marks of the cross – not the search for comfort, prestige, power or fame."<sup>2</sup> A respondent to this essay in the book, Professor Richard Peace from Fuller, agrees that there is too much of a "low-demand gospel" in Christian churches with a

“lowered compassion index,” especially in times of economic stress. Such churches, argues Peace in agreement with Villafañe’s reading of Philippians, make choices that “contradict their values.”<sup>3</sup> This analysis from 2006 came to full fruition, I would argue, ten years later in the 2016 Presidential election, in which so many white evangelicals, statistics show, voted for a candidate of questionable moral character and a low “compassion index.”<sup>4</sup>

In a second essay in the *Beyond Cheap Grace* volume, Villafañe takes us to another of his favorite biblical books, Amos. Villafañe explores the prophetic leadership of Amos, his call from obscurity to courageously confront those in power with a word from God that demanded justice for the poor and the oppressed of Israel. Villafañe cites the global implications of Amos’s call to justice – right relationships especially with the poor and needy – in terms of the wrong actions of nations, whether externally or internally. Some of the problems described in Amos, as Villafañe recounts them, sound all too familiar to our ears, unfortunately: cruelty, violence, slave trading, breaking covenants or treaties, imperialism. With regard to the latter, Villafañe laments U.S. complicity in a “modern” imperialism as “the only existing super-power today.”<sup>5</sup>

In short, Amos presents a challenge to nations in power. The heart of Amos’s message, Villafañe insists, is that “rulers . . . and nations will be judged by how they treat their weakest members.”<sup>6</sup> In our own day, we are reminded about the U.S. federal response to the crisis in Puerto Rico, post-Hurricane Maria, as an example of gross negligence in the just treatment of people in dire need. Toward the end of his essay on Amos, Villafañe cites other biblical texts to support his interpretation of Amos, including the prophet Isaiah and the Gospel of Matthew, which he cites elsewhere as foundational for a Christian social ethic: “For I was

hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me” (Mt. 25:42-43a NRSV). The Matthew text goes on to insist that *not* doing such just actions on behalf of the poor and needy is detrimental to our relationship with God. Indeed, Villafañe cites just actions on behalf of the poor, the hungry and thirsty as exemplary of the “social spirituality” he calls for in several of his writings.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Biblical Themes in Villafañe’s Social Ethics*

This brings me to a second approach in reading Eldin Villafañe and his use of the Bible in constructing his theological social ethics: Some overarching biblical *themes* that inform his social ethic. In a third essay from *Beyond Cheap Grace*, Villafañe explores several New Testament texts, especially Johannine ones, to make a case for an incarnational theological education. One of the major contributions of Villafañe’s long and impactful career has been thinking critically about the practice of theological education. In this specific essay, Villafañe argues that just as the early church determined that God was in Christ in a dynamic and dialectic way – both humanly and divinely – theological education needs to be incarnated in the texts and contexts of people on the ground and in the trenches of faith and practice. The often paralyzing dichotomies between theory and practice, so-called, in typical seminary education creates unnecessary disciplinary divisions in theological curricula that do not benefit the necessary leadership preparation of women and men for church, academy and society in the postmodern world. Thus, in this case and others, Villafañe invokes biblical themes as “paradigms” that should undergird action/reflection methodologies for theology, ethics and education.

As another interlocutor, Professor Juan Francisco Martinez, comments with regard to this essay, Villafañe wants us to “think theologically about theological education,” but also to use biblical themes like incarnation as “theological method” and “hermeneutical method.” Specifically in reference to biblical hermeneutics and urban ministry, Martinez posits that Villafañe exegetes the Bible in light of the city and the city in light of the Bible.<sup>8</sup>

In my own estimation, perhaps the most powerful biblical-theological theme invoked by Villafañe is his insistence that institutions of all kinds – in the academy, the church, and in society – pay attention to what he calls “the power of the powerless.” In an essay about that topic included in his 1995 volume, *Seek the Peace of the City: Reflections on Urban Ministry*, Villafañe cites the language of 1 Corinthians: “For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength” (1 Cor. 1:25 NIV).<sup>9</sup> For Villafañe, this text from Paul’s theology of the cross in 1 Corinthians, in which the experience of service and sacrifice is emblematic of Christian witness and justice, demonstrates that authentic power often comes from people and places we least expect. In Paul’s thinking, it was the enigmatic cross of Christ that unleashed faith for Christ followers. For modern believers, and indeed people of all faiths, as Villafañe sees it, the cross exemplifies the need to include the voices of the voiceless in all that we do as faith communities, educational institutions, and indeed in politics and government.

Villafañe accompanies his reading from 1 Corinthians with a parallel reading from 2 Corinthians, which he actually uses as a mantra throughout his writings about social justice, including who practices social justice and how: “For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor.

12:9). Acknowledgement of human weakness and trusting the divine should empower “the least of these” in our theological and social justice endeavors. Villafañe cites Gustavo Gutierrez’s work on the “power of the poor in history” in this regard. The New Testament theology of the cross posits not self-aggrandizement, but the well being of the community, including communities of the poor, who, if we look closely enough, have much to offer, argues Villafañe again and again throughout his work. The cross of Christ is “a paradigm,” he writes, “a model for our lives and for the life of the church.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Villafañe’s ecclesiology assumes that the church should have a focus on being a church of the poor, not just the comfortable.

So, how can the church of the poor be a partner, even if a “partner from the underside,” as Villafañe describes it? Because, as Villafañe, with style and alliteration, posits, such partners practice salvation as liberation, provide social service *and* advocate for social justice, ensure survival of Latinx culture, language, and affirmation, unveil the presence or “signs” of God’s reign in the here and now, exemplify the “hermeneutical advantage of the poor,” and point toward the signposts of resistance to entrenched power.<sup>11</sup> In other words, as Villafañe insists again and again, “When I am weak, then I am strong.” In short, based on the New Testament theology of the cross, partnership with the poor, according to Villafañe, is essential in any biblical Christian social ethics.

### *The Inaugural “La Comunidad” Address*

Eldin Villafañe has been arguing for and living with these commitments for many years. In his address as first President of La Comunidad of Hispanic Scholars of Religion in 1990, published in *Seek the Peace of the City*,

Villafañe exemplified these commitments, as he presided over the first official meeting of La Comunidad after he helped found the organization in 1989.<sup>12</sup> He suggested that scholarship, including in religious studies, needed to be an *engaged* scholarship. He used the metaphors of *sierva* (servant), *santificadora* (explained by Villafañe as prophetic and political voice of sanctification against systemic sin) and *sanadora* (healing voice for the hurting). Again, Villafañe invoked biblical images: the “I came to serve” gospel text in Mark and the “Spirit of the Lord is upon me to proclaim good news” text in Luke. He saw these core gospel texts as applicable to and inclusive of the scholarly task of Latinx academics, and not just pastoral or religious leaders in faith communities. Villafañe called upon Latinx scholars not to follow “the pied piper of the elite white (and male) intellectual/academic establishment’s agenda.” Rather, Latinx scholars should set our own agendas, albeit with even “more, not less academic rigor, analytical and synthetic powers, and intellectual integrity.”<sup>13</sup>

Although most contemporary Latinx scholars of religion did not hear Eldin Villafañe’s address at that AAR/SBL meeting in 1990, as an observer of how Latinx religious scholarship has developed since I myself heard him that day, I think it is safe to say that the vast majority of our scholars, in whatever specific disciplines of religion they study, and whatever their faith commitments might or might not be – they do practice an engaged scholarship that cares about the community that sent them forward and continues to expect great and important things from them. For example, on Sunday evening, November 19 at the 2017 AAR/SBL meetings in Boston, a hastily, but carefully, planned forum on the dire situation in Puerto Rico after a vicious hurricane struck it just two short months before

(September 20) bore witness to such scholarly commitments. Several Latinx religion scholars lent the full brunt of both their scholarship and advocacy, from the perspective of religious, theological and historical studies, to voice their concerns about the recovery and rebuilding efforts on the Island.<sup>14</sup> As a Puerto Rican scholar, theologian and biblically-rooted ethicist, Eldin Villafañe would resonate deeply with such efforts.

### *Conclusion*

This brief exploration of the work of Eldin Villafañe could have said so much more. We hardly touched on Villafañe's seminal work in *Pentecostal Latinx social ethics, The Liberating Spirit*, including his critique of the "prosperity gospel" in some Pentecostal/Charismatic enclaves. We only alluded to his scholarly contributions to the field of urban ministry and urban theological education. And we only briefly referred to Villafañe's early call for an *evangelical* social spirituality, based on a strong, consistent pneumatology. Such a social spirituality refused to divide the gospel into a dichotomy of evangelism or social justice; the gospel is both, Villafañe has insisted repeatedly throughout his career.

Moreover, I am sure Eldin Villafañe laments the directions that some corners of evangelicalism in this country have taken in their unfathomable support of the current U.S. Presidential administration. Whatever happened to the expectations of morality and integrity in our political leaders in some corners of white evangelicalism, Villafañe and so many other adherents and students of the movement must be asking?<sup>15</sup> It sounds like in those spaces, Villafañe's strong consistent call for partnership with the underside, as a signpost of a biblical social ethic, has not

been heeded, if it was ever heard. There are indeed serious problems facing our nation politically, socially, and culturally, making the work of religious and theological scholarship ever more important. In that regard, we should be thankful for the critically important biblical and ethical scholarship of Eldin Villafañe, which set a tone, early and often, of prophetic academic service and ethics by reading of texts and contexts, not just over 25 years ago with *La Comunidad of Hispanic Scholars of Religion*, but over 40 years ago and since in his service to faith communities, the academy, and society as a whole.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Eldin Villafañe, *The Liberating Spirit: Toward An Hispanic American Pentecostal Social Ethic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Eldin Villafañe, *Beyond Cheap Grace: A Call to Radical Discipleship, Incarnation and Justice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Peace, “A Response to ‘The Christian Mind-set and Postmodernity,’” in *Beyond Cheap Grace*, 21, in a quote from George Gallup, Jr. and Timothy Jones, *The Next American Spirituality: Finding God in the Twenty-first Century* (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Publishing, 2000), pp. 30-33.

<sup>4</sup> The well-known statistic of 81% of the “white evangelical vote” for Trump in the 2016 presidential

election was already available in a Pew Research Center study the day after the election in “How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis,” by Gregory A. Smith and Jessica Martinez at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/>

<sup>5</sup> Villafañe, *Beyond Cheap Grace*, 70.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>7</sup> In particular, “An Evangelical Call to a Social Spirituality: Confronting Evil in Urban Society,” in his *Seek the Peace of the City: Reflections on Urban Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 12-28.

<sup>8</sup> Juan F. Martinez, “Response to ‘El Verbo Fue Hecho Carne’” in *Beyond Cheap Grace*, 50-54.

<sup>9</sup> Villafañe, “The Power of the Powerless: A Paradigm of Partnership from the Underside” in *Seek the Peace of the City*, 29-39.

<sup>10</sup> Villafañe, “The Power of the Powerless,” 31.

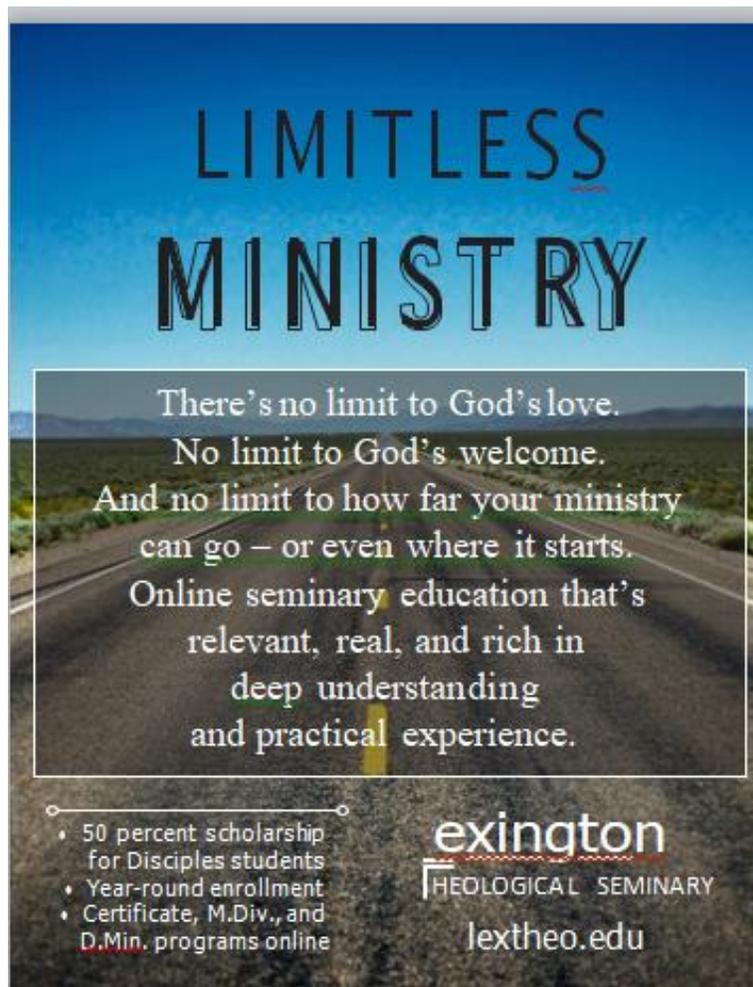
<sup>11</sup> These partnership themes are unpacked in “The Power of the Powerless,” 32-38.

<sup>12</sup> See “Scholarship as *Sierva*, *Santificadora*, and *Sanadora*” in *Seek the Peace of the City*, 7-11.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Several of these presentations will be published in the forthcoming Spring 2018 issue of *Perspectivas: The Journal of the Hispanic Theological Initiative*.

<sup>15</sup> Among the many critiques of this unfortunate development, Republican commentator and evangelical, Michael Gerson, has written a scathing analysis in the April 2018 issue of *The Atlantic*: “The Last Temptation: How Evangelicals Once Culturally Confident Became An Anxious Minority Seeking Political Protection From the Least Traditionally Religious President in Living Memory.”



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