
**LATINX MISSIOLOGY AND FAITH-ROOTED ORGANIZING:
PODER ESPIRITUAL Y JUSTICIA SOCIAL**
ALEXIA SALVATIERRA

Abstract

Faith-based community organizing engages faith leaders and congregations in the practice of shifting power relations for the purpose of enfranchising the marginalized and creating a just society. Faith-rooted organizing is a relatively new approach to faith-based organizing. It questions the secular assumptions underlying standard models of community organizing and seeks to develop approaches to organizing that are completely shaped by faith while engaging faith leaders and congregations in contributing their unique gifts to broader movements for justice. Hispanic spirituality and culture can offer particular contributions to faith-rooted organizing, deepening and strengthening the interaction between spiritual power and community organizing.

Introduction

I have been a community organizer for almost forty years. I have also been an ordained pastor in the Lutheran Church for more than thirty years and a professor in the field of urban transformation for more than fifteen years. All of those tasks involved direct engagement with power, and I have found that my Christian Hispanic heritage can contribute significantly to the process of attaining a more just society. One important shift in my approach is from faith-based community organizing to faith-rooted organizing.

Faith-based community organizing engages faith leaders and congregations in working toward societal power-sharing. Christians

Rev. Alexia Salvatierra, DMiss., is an Affiliate Professor of Intercultural Studies, Fuller Theological Seminary

who participate in faith-based organizing typically understand this work as part of their mission. They share a vision of holistic mission in service to a God who desires shalom—peace and justice—for all. They understand that gross power inequities affect the extent to which poor and marginalized people experience societal shalom. Dr. Robert Linthicum, a well-known proponent of faith-based organizing, states, “As Christians we have to learn to use power in a Christian manner—relationally not unilaterally—because relational power is of the essence of the gospel.”¹ Community organizing aims to make democracy work, opening the process of public decision making to include all stakeholders as equal participants.

However, while faith-based community organizing typically is motivated by religious beliefs and values and often uses religious language to communicate with faith leaders and congregations, its underlying assumptions about the nature of power typically reflect a secular worldview. In the United States, the oft-described father of community organizing, Saul Alinsky, was a secular Jew. He understood power as an objective quality that can be possessed, traded, gained, or lost. “Political realists see the world as it is: an arena of power politics moved primarily by perceived immediate self-interests, where morality is rhetorical rationale for expedient action and self-interest.”² Power in this context is derived from the threat of force or the potential benefits conferred by financial resources, social status, or numbers of votes. Some people and groups have more power than others, and those who have power tend to hold on to it if they possibly can. Faith-based community organizers typically agree with Frederick Douglass that “power never gives up power without a demand.”

¹ Robert Linthicum, *Transforming Power: Biblical Strategies for Making a Difference in Your Community* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 20. Dr. Linthicum is one of the best-known and most prolific Christian apologists for community organizing. He speaks from more than thirty years of participating in the practice of community organizing in the United States and internationally.

² Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1971), 12–13.

Christian theology has more to offer to an understanding of power and its role in social equity than this fundamentally secular set of concepts. Faith-rooted community organizing, which builds on core assumptions rooted in deep wells of spirituality, brings people together to create systemic change in ways that are guided and shaped on all levels by faith traditions and which engage people of faith in contributing our unique gifts to broader movements. Faith-rooted community organizing evaluates the assumptions and processes of community organizing in the light of spiritual beliefs and practices. Faith-rooted organizing can be done in relationship to any faith traditions.

I am particularly drawn to organizing rooted in Christian faith for a variety of reasons. First, I am a *Luthercostal* (Lutheran and Pentecostal) pastor; my doctrinal perspectives and spiritual orientation compel me to examine the deepest and broadest connections possible between faith and the process of social transformation. As a professor of missiology, I believe that missiology, understood as the branch of theology that focuses on the mission of the church in the world, seems to be the natural locus of the question, What can a Christian perspective on power contribute to the practice of the use and sharing of power to respond to social injustice and seek societal shalom? As a member of the pueblo Hispano, I come from a community formed by centuries of suffering at the hands of unjust social, economic, and political systems. I am particularly interested in how Latinx culture and spirituality might potentially contribute to the conversation on the nature of power and organizing for justice. Of course, Christian Hispanics have a wide variety of perspectives on power, but this article will utilize the case of two Christian asylum-seekers from Central America and the life experiences and work of the author to suggest a unique approach to organizing for shalom.

Spiritual Power and Social Justice in This Historic Moment

“For God did not give us a Spirit of fear but of power and love and self-control” (2 Tim. 1:7 ESV).

Webster's Dictionary defines *power* as the capacity to act or to influence others to act. The Greek word translated as power in 2 Timothy 1:7 is *dunamis*, the root word for the English words *dynamite*, *dynamo*, and *dynamic*. The variety of biblical uses of *dunamis*, from moral power to miraculous power to the power of wealth³, roughly reflect Webster's definition but add a nuance—*dunamis* is a characteristic that enables a desired impact. While the phrase "the capacity to act" focuses on the element of action, we could say that *dunamis* is a little deeper and broader, including the source of the capacity as well as going a step farther to include the result of the action. Using the word and concept of *dunamis* helps us ask a missiological question: What (or who) does our power come from, and what is its role in mission?

When we look at our current historic moment through the lens of *dunamis*, we live in an age of intense and widespread power struggles on multiple levels. Whose impact is secure? Whose impact will determine the core elements of our common life? In arenas from gender to culture to politics to trade, many of us feel like we are living on a battlefield. For some of us, the constantly shifting and ruthless power struggles around us are threatening the survival of our families.

Some thought leaders believe that power is more fluid at this point in history than it has ever been. Thomas L. Friedman's book on globalization, *The World Is Flat*, asserts that we are increasingly confronting a level playing field across historical social and national divisions.⁴ On the other hand, in 1993, I heard a presentation by Emilio Castro, the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches.⁵ He projected that over the next twenty-five years, the world would see increasing political democracy and increasing economic consolidation of power. He proclaimed that this would create a schizophrenic experience that would provoke profound anxiety, which would in turn compel people to seek simplistic

³ NAS Greek Lectionary.

⁴ Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: MacMillan Publishers, 2005).

⁵ I heard Dr. Castro speak at a thought leaders' conference in California co-sponsored by the Vesper Society.

answers and pursue demagogues. Evidence suggests that his projections have come true. The World Inequality Database, which engages hundreds of researchers around the world in measuring inequality, has demonstrated that economic inequality is steadily rising around the globe with the top ten percent of North America moving from earning thirty-four percent of the overall income in 1980 to forty-seven percent in 2018.⁶ Research still needs to be done about the connection between these economic realities and our social problems, but a case could be made that the population of the United States in general is suffering from high levels of anxiety and that demagogues are becoming more popular. What does the promise of *dunamis* mean in the midst of this historical moment?

Alfredo was a local government official in Honduras and Rene a community leader in rural Guatemala. They come from countries where interventions by the U.S. government and corporations over a fifty-year period have strengthened the social inequities established by the Spanish conquistadors through their land grants. Poverty and the legacy of extended civil wars have led to international organized crime syndicates controlling major territory throughout the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras). Alfredo and Rene fled their respective communities and countries because these organized crime syndicates in bed with corrupt politicians and police gave them an impossible choice—betray your deepest values and the people you love, or die. Objectively, this was an experience of terrible powerlessness. They had no impact on the forces that threatened all that they held dear. Their only real option was to take their families and run, with nothing but the clothes on their backs—joining the 25.9 million migrants internationally seeking refuge from persecution.⁷

However, both Alfredo and Rene believe that the power of the Holy Spirit has accompanied them in their struggles and journeys, as surely as the pillar of fire and cloud accompanied the children of

⁶ World Inequality Database, <https://wid.world/>

⁷ International Organization for Migration: World Migration Report 2018, https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/country/docs/china/r5_world_migration_report_2018_en.pdf.

Israel. They believe not only that the power of God is in them and with them, but also that this power had (and continues to have) real-world impact in their lives.

Alfredo and Rene each sought asylum in the United States twice. Each of their initial journeys resulted in their eldest children being ripped from their arms and placed in detention centers while they were deported without the opportunity to apply for asylum. Their second journey had a happier (albeit interim) ending; they are currently reunited with their children and in the process of applying for asylum as a family. They each believe that all the good that they have experienced in the midst of their struggle, from the capacity to maintain their integrity originally to the support of the lawyers and congregations assisting them, is a manifestation of the powerful love of God. This same powerful love moves them to continue to be involved with the struggle for immigrant justice, not only for themselves but for others—believing that the power of God works transcendentally and incarnationally, for them as particular individuals or families and for the shalom of communities and nations. Alfredo and Rene believe that they have *dunamis*. What does their perspective offer to an understanding of the power of God operating missionally in the midst of the dangerous and destructive power struggles of our current age?

Power can be categorized in a wide variety of ways. We can talk about power in the context of different schools of thought and theories of change. Different disciplines focus to various extents on individual, organizational, systemic, and mystical powers. However, the question that matters most for many Latinx Christians, and particularly for those who carry multiple burdens, is not how we label or dissect power but rather how we experience power. The power of the Holy Spirit in the books of Acts is first and foremost a tangible, visceral experience. Alfredo and Rene would testify to this same experience in their lives. The missiological task is how to describe this kind of experience faithfully so that we can all enter into it more deeply, not only for our sake but for the sake of the world.

Alfredo and Rene's experience of power is paradoxical. They experience it as simultaneously personal and communal, present and absent, current and promised, mystical and political. They

experience that God's power is made perfect in weakness. How do we parse a paradox? It might be helpful to reflect on four different aspects of this paradox—the transcendent and the incarnational, the individual and collective, the present and not-yet, and the integration of serpent wisdom and dove power.

The Paradox of Spiritual Power:

Transcendent and Incarnational

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way (Ephesians 1:17–23 NIV).

The vision of the universal power of God in the letter to the Ephesians can be hard to reconcile with the refugee experience, or even with the daily realities of suffering and impotence experienced by the majority of the world. It was equally difficult for the first readers of the letter to the Ephesians who were facing the beginning of increasing persecution by Rome. We could say that it is a vision of transcendent power; the dictionary definition of *transcendence* is that which is beyond our normal experience. However, the faith of the growing Pentecostal and charismatic movements in the global south (which are the cradle of the faith of Alfredo and Rene) would

affirm that this transcendent experience, while continuing to be at odds with many of our ongoing experiences, is paradoxically accessible to us on multiple levels in *lo cotidiano* (the routine details of our daily lives).

I once pastored a church made up primarily of immigrant farmworkers in the Central Valley of California. A young, undocumented woman in the church gave birth to a baby with multiple medical problems. The doctors said that he was likely to die and that if he lived, he would be blind and disabled. As a community organizer, I began to advocate for more medical options than an undocumented farmworker family would normally receive. However, it seemed like there might not be time medically for a campaign to bear fruit, even if that would be possible and would make a difference. The church entered into an intense time of prayer and fasting. As their Lutheran seminary-trained pastor, I was dubious about the potential impact and worried about the theological implications of their confident faith that the baby would experience a miraculous healing. However, I knew that I needed to participate and to support them. At a certain point in the process, everyone in the circle suddenly felt a wave of heat, energy, and joy. It passed through the prayer circle like a strong wind. The baby survived and was neither blind nor disabled (although he was seriously near-sighted). This is a familiar story in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Of course, sometimes the baby dies. It is not scientifically predictable. Global south Christians are not blind to this reality; they hold and live with the paradox of a transcendent power whose impact is often tangible but never predictable.

Of course, whether or not the miracle of physical healing occurs, Christians around the world and throughout history have often experienced a different form of transcendence. The capacity to rise above terrible suffering is a kind of power that is particularly important for those in situations of objective oppression. I minister to and with Central American asylum-seekers. In the midst of horror stories, many also share testimonies of the peace and strength they received from their experience of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Even though they did not always have the power to change their circumstances, these experiences gave them the power to not be

changed in turn. Instead of being disabled or destroyed, they were able to retain enough of an inner sense of worth and hope to keep moving forward. This form of power is the mirror image of the capacity to act or influence. It is the power to not be acted upon—an indispensable foundation for any other experience of power. Liberation theologians in Latin America during the 1970s and '80s often used the phrase “from object to subject” to describe the process of empowerment. Those who had come to see themselves as helpless pawns in an unjust system began to see themselves as creative actors, living out the image of the Creator God.

In cultures characterized by compartmentalization, these transcendent forms of power might not have any implications for or connections to the experience of incarnate power. Incarnate power can be defined simply as the experience of the power of God in and through human action. When I came to accept Christ as Lord and Savior in the Jesus Movement of the 1970s in Los Angeles, I entered into a charismatic experience that included mystical ecstasy. As young believers, we spent hours weeping and dancing, feeling a sense of peace and joy that was completely disconnected from our circumstances. We believed that miracles were possible, but we had been taught that a very clear dividing line exists between the spiritual and material worlds, particularly with respect to the institutions and systems of the world. The Holy Spirit might heal us from sickness or find us a job (although we could only count on internal experiences of spiritual power), but it could never change an unjust law or protect a community from a contaminating power plant. I was also taught a corresponding distinction between God's action and human action. Many of us believed that Jesus' Second Coming would usher in an age of peace and prosperity, but we considered it blasphemy to believe that God could work through us to bring social transformation in the current age.

In cultures with a less binary perspective, the experience of transcendent power can lead naturally to the expectation of

incarnate power.⁸ In 1974, two young Latin American evangelical leaders, Rene Padilla and Samuel Escobar, came to the worldwide evangelical conference in Lausanne with a challenging message; they asserted that God's call for mission incorporates the full integration of the physical and spiritual dimensions of the gospel. They were not alone in their beliefs. The *Fraternidad de Teólogos Latinoamericanos* (Latin American Theological Fellowship) had been founded in 1970 by young evangelical leaders throughout Latin America. As Dr. Ruth Padilla Deborst quotes in her chapter on Integral Transformation in *The Mission of the Church: Five Views in Conversation*:

In the missiological framework emerging within the FTL, which soon changed its name to Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana, the church is conceived as missionary by nature. So every local church and every Christian is called to participate in God's mission. Mission is integral: it has to do with the transformation of human life in all its dimensions, not only the individual or sacred, but also the social and secular. Border crossing is not only geographical but also cultural, racial, social, political, and economic. The objective is integral redemption: that all people may enjoy the life in abundance that God intends through Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit (Padilla and Segura 2006, editorial note)⁹.

⁸ When evangelists and teachers of Christian faith have come from a compartmentalized culture to evangelize members of a less binary culture, even when those who are evangelized would naturally see the world as integrated, they take on the perspective of their teachers in which transcendent experiences of power have no incarnate dimension. I have taught students with this colonial perspective in my seminary courses at the Centro Latino at Fuller Theological Seminary. When they are freed up to see the gospel through their natural cultural lenses, they often weep with release.

⁹ Ruth Padilla Deborst, "An Integral Transformation Approach: Being, Doing and Saying," in *The Mission of the Church: Five Views in Conversation*, ed. Craig Ott (Ada, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2016), 65.

Al Tizon, in his study of radical evangelism, describes the early work of the Latin American Theological Fellowship: “these leaders brought together what should never be separated, evangelization with liberation, a change of heart with a change of structures, vertical reconciliation (between God and people) and horizontal reconciliation (between just people), and church planting with community blessing.”¹⁰

This integration has been lived out in various ways by Latinx leaders who might never have heard of the movement for integral transformation sparked and led by Padilla and Escobar. Jill de Temple studied the Universal Church of God, a Pentecostal movement that originated in Brazil. As part of their understanding of the Lordship of Christ, they regularly prayed against the demons of unjust social systems, poverty, isolation, and disenfranchisement. They also actively participated in public policy advocacy as an act of incarnation, moving as the Body of Christ to cast out the demons.¹¹

In 1966, in the farmworker movement for justice led by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, farmworkers marched almost two hundred fifty miles from Delano to Sacramento, the capital of California, to advocate for farmworkers to be covered by labor protections available to all other workers in the United States. As they marched, they held high in front of them a cross entwined with grape leaves to remind them that as Jesus’ cross led to resurrection, so his power working in and through them could lead to a more abundant life for them and for their children. (They also carried the image of the Virgen of Guadalupe, which is connected to a story with the core message that God favors and fights for poor, oppressed, and marginalized people.) The United Farm Workers’ union was successful in achieving an almost miraculous level of

¹⁰ Al Tizon, *Transformation After Lausanne: Radical Evangelical Mission in Global-Local Perspective* (Oxford, UK: Regnum 2008), 6.

¹¹ Jill DeTemple, “Chains of Liberation: Poverty and Social Action in the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God,” in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, eds. Gaston Espinoza, Virgilio Elizondo, and Jess Miranda (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005).

change in their objective circumstances through legislation that enabled organizing for better wages and benefits.¹²

As a result, many of their children were able to take advantage of opportunities for education, allowing for increased individual power as well as positional power in systems which then helped to further improve laws impacting farmworkers. California State Senator Maria Elena Durazo was the child of farmworkers in the Central Valley. Her parents were leaders in the farmworker movement, and their lives were changed by its achievements. Between being a farmworker child and a senator, she was the first Latina leader of a union local of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees, and then the chief executive of the Los Angeles Labor Federation. Former Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis came from a family of low-wage workers who fought for justice for immigrant workers as part of their faith commitment. Her father was poisoned by workplace pollution but then turned his suffering into a form of spiritual victory as a leader in a campaign for increased regulation. The relationship between transcendent power and incarnate power for the Durazo and Solis families has been fluid and interactive.

A Latinx Christian view of power holds the paradox of interconnected transcendent and incarnate experiences of God's power working with, in, and beyond human action in ways that impact all levels of our individual and communal lives.

Individual and Collective

In the stories of the farmworker movement, just as transcendent and immanent power are paradoxical, fluid, and interconnected, so is the movement of power from individuals to collective and back again. The image of the Body of Christ in Corinthians

¹² The struggle of the United Farm Workers has been documented and studied extensively. For an overview of the spiritual aspects of the struggle utilizing the primary texts in the field, read "The Spiritual Praxis of Cesar Chavez" by Robert Chao Romero in *Perspectivas*, the online, peer-reviewed journal of the Hispanic Theological Initiative (Issue 14, 2017). However, I also speak from experience. Dolores Huerta is a mentor to me. The ensuing stories also come from personal experience; Maria Elena Durazo is a friend and coworker, and Hilda Solis is a colleague.

holds up an incarnate vision of collective action to solve common problems and achieve common goals. At the same time, each part must develop itself as fully as possible in order for the whole to attain maximum effectiveness. This image directly challenges the automatic assumption of tension between the well-being and power of the individual and the well-being and power of the group in the global north. Rather than seeing the interests of the individual and of society as competitive, they are portrayed as inextricably interwoven. It is the one Spirit that animates the Body that guides and enables the integration.

In *Strong and Weak*, Andy Crouch addresses the perceived tension between individual interests and collective interests in North America by lifting up the model of Servant Authority offered by Jesus (as an alternative to the world's alternatives of power abused through exploitation and abandoned through withdrawal).¹³ However, this model suffers from the automatic vision of the leader as an individual, rather than the image of an individual as a body part, inextricably tied to a network of other functioning parts that are essential to its survival and capacity. In the Latin American cultures where Alfredo and Rene grew up, power is neither neatly individual nor collective; impact by individuals and collective entities is fluid and integrated.

A perspective on power that emphasizes the choice and capacity of the individual indirectly supports the maintenance of an unjust distribution of power by obscuring broader dynamics. Several years ago, a friend and colleague who had relocated to the inner city asked me to endorse a book about her ministry. The book described a number of interesting, endearing, and at times admirable characters who lived in their community. The author clearly strove to be inclusive and to recognize the value of her neighbors—common themes in conversations about racial reconciliation and racial justice. However, reading the book produced uneasy feelings. All of the protagonists in the book were white or married to white people. All of the Christian agents of God's transformation were

¹³ Andy Crouch, *Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk and True Flourishing* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2016).

from outside the neighborhood and had moved there as modern missionaries. Wonderful people of color were present in every scene, but the heroes of the play were white.

One of my most vivid experiences of that perspective came when I was consulting for an international organization of the new movement of missionaries who are committed to a ministry of presence. They are based in some of the most distressed areas of the globe, where injustice is rampant, quietly living in the community and often operating after-school programs for local children. As I listened to the story of one missionary couple who were based in a context where young girls are regularly trafficked, I had two immediate reactions—how could they sit by and watch trafficking happen when they had resources and power to contribute to local movements working against it? If it was their own children being trafficked, would they just be present with them in the face of that threat? And on an even more basic level, why did they think that their mere presence was a gift? In the inner-city neighborhood where I grew up, I would not experience their presence in my community as an automatic gift to us. The subtle implication that they were heroic for just living in that community was offensive to me. I certainly did appreciate their desire to serve and their willingness to sacrifice, but I was upset by their lack of the awareness of communal dimensions of power, including the power that they brought as U.S. citizens and the power of social movements in the countries where they served.

In comparison, Matthew 25/Mateo 25 (a network of immigrant and nonimmigrant churches in Southern California) recently organized an immersion experience in Tijuana for the Justice Conference in collaboration with Global Immersion. Each van of North American visitors was led by a *Puente* (a bilingual, bicultural Latinx millennial minister of the Gospel). Instead of focusing on the pain of Central American families seeking asylum and deportees, the site visits focused on the ministry of Mexican Christians to and with those who were suffering. After the immersion, a young white woman shared that the experience changed her life because it changed “who was the hero.” She saw power moving fluidly in and through communities where previously she had unconsciously

seen those same people as the recipients of help rather than as the agents of God's transformation.

Lisa Sharon Harper in *The Very Good Gospel* describes pre-Fall humanity as sharing dominion.¹⁴ God pours his power into them so that they can exercise dominion (creative power) over and with the rest of creation. They surrender that power back to God in trust, and then God in turn gives it back in a fluid communal dance that echoes the relationships within the Trinity. The human beings also share the same power with each other toward the accomplishment of the same task. In the description of the Fall in Genesis 3, shared dominion is lost and replaced by the domination of one human being by the other. The restoration that Christ brings reinstitutes shared dominion.

Hispanic Christians who are free to use their natural cultural lenses can easily see individual and communal power as interwoven, fluid, mutually empowering, and enriching.

Present and Not Yet

The daily experience of fluid and paradoxical power is not an ideal state, devoid of anguish, anxiety, disappointment, and defeat. Alfredo and Rene's faith that God's power is in them, with them, and operates through them does not take away the pain of their experience of powerlessness. They live the reality of the kingdom that has come in Jesus but will not be fully experienced until He comes again. They know that this in-between time is full of experiences of the presence and the absence of God's power. They do not, however, limit the scope of that power. Jesus' lordship extends over the whole world, even though it is not tangibly experienced at all times and places. We live on this side of the cross but with foretastes of the feast to come in every aspect of our individual and collective lives.

For example, Dr. Juan Martinez of Fuller Theological Seminary, in a keynote presentation at a Christian Missions conference, shared the story of a congregation he pastored in Texas that regularly prayed for divine intervention to blind the eyes of border

¹⁴ Lisa Sharon Harper, *The Very Good Gospel* (New York: Waterbrook, Crown Publishing, 2016), 16–37.

patrol agents so that deported fathers could return to join their families. The congregation understood that a direct relationship exists between the well-being of children and the operations of the immigration system. They trusted that God cares about the well-being of children and therefore the power of God could and might change the immigration system.¹⁵

Dr. Robert Linthicum, in *Transforming Power*, asserts that this perspective was also shared by Paul:

Because Paul believed that there was an open door between the spiritual world and physical world, he held that the governance of both worlds was also irretrievably linked...Therefore the principalities and powers are not solely spiritual forces of heaven and of hell at war with each other. Nor are the principalities and powers simply the political, economic and religious systems of human society. The principalities and powers are both spiritual and earthly.¹⁶

In the courses I teach, I often encounter students from the global north who want to figure out the line where human action stops and God's action begins. They want to know how much God does and how much we do. Correspondingly, they would like to decide how much of the kingdom we can incarnate in the current age and how much has to be left for Jesus to institute in the Second Coming. They feel like it is essential for orthodoxy and orthopraxis to know how much power we have been given to impact the broader world and where we are entering into a state of hubris by attempting to use power that we have not been given. Neither Alfredo nor Rene would understand these questions. They would presume that we will not have any positive impact in private or public spheres unless the *dunamis* comes from God. It is God in us, through us, and beyond us who acts to do his will on earth as it is in heaven. We will know that a particular aspect of God's righteousness, justice, or shalom is "not yet" when we are unable to accomplish it.

¹⁵ International Wholistic Missions Conference, May 2017.

¹⁶ Linthicum, 113–144.

Serpent Wisdom and Dove Power

“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16 NIV).

Community organizing offers a set of strategies and methods for impacting systems through affecting public decision makers. If we accept the truth of the above paradoxes, that the power of God works in transcendent and incarnate ways, through an interaction between individual and collective power, impacting private and public spheres, and living as much as possible in the peaceable kingdom of God, it makes sense for ministers of the gospel and other disciples of Jesus to learn tools for making systems behave more justly and support abundant life for all. However, it also makes sense to hold the principles and processes of community organizing accountable to all that we know about God’s essence and call.

Traditional community organizing practices in the United States are based on an understanding of power rooted in serpent shrewdness. When we are sufficiently shrewd that we can perceive the carnal self-interest underlying the decisions of a political actor, we can impact those decisions by appealing to those interests, convincing him that we have the capacity to either benefit or hurt him. The assumption underneath this perspective is that carnal self-interest is the only reliable motivator. If a group of people with few resources want to impact a public decision maker, then their only effective alternative is to apply sufficient pressure so that the cost of not meeting their interests will be greater than the cost of meeting them. Shrewd organizers also know that pressure often has a cost. If you have successfully pressured a public decision maker to take a desired action, never turn your back and focus on another direction. He will quietly go back to doing what he has done before. In fact, he might want vengeance enough for the humiliation of being pressured to act against his will that the end will be worse than the beginning. However, if constant pressure

is the only alternative in order to shift the balance of power so that the needs of relatively disenfranchised people are met, then it is worth the expenditure of energy that it takes. In the parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18:1–8, Jesus assumes that this is sometimes how the world works. The unjust judge gives the widow justice because she creates a critical mass of pressure, making it more uncomfortable to resist change than to allow it. Sheep better be shrewd in order to avoid being eaten by wolves.

Jesus does not only call his disciples to be shrewd as snakes. He also calls them to be innocent as doves. Can there be power in the innocence of the dove? To be wise as a serpent is to take seriously the carnal and sinful aspects of human nature. Human beings, however, are more than their carnal and sinful selves. To be innocent as doves is to take seriously the spiritual aspects of human nature. We are all made in the image of God, and the Holy Spirit is at work on us all. Anyone can be suddenly capable of amazing acts of sacrificial love and moral courage. As there are tools for creating a critical mass of pressure, so there are tools for evoking the best in people. To be innocent as a dove is to have an open heart and to believe that someone else can change and grow. Dove tools express and incarnate a different sort of power than the tools for creating pressure. When Nathan the prophet in 2 Samuel 12 goes to King David to call him to account for his destructive actions, he does not start by pressuring David based on his self-interest. He tells a story about a poor shepherd who loved his one lone lamb and a rich landowner who took the lamb from him to make a meal for his guests, evoking David the former shepherd boy's sense of justice and awakening his heart. This experience leads David to repentance. These spiritual tools can be utilized to lead public decision makers to live by their faith even when it is costly or risky as well as engaging neighbors in working together for the common good instead of merely pursuing their individual interests. Dove power can provide a unique witness to the love and power of God to change hearts and minds.

Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa is a black Episcopal bishop who was one of the leaders of the struggle against the unjust system of apartheid. He is a proponent of and expert in the use of

dove power. Facing the same kind of cruel and corrupt principalities that attacked the families of Alfredo and Rene, he managed to become a key leader in a movement that changed the decisions of some of them and deposed others. Multiple famous stories are told about Bishop Tutu's interactions with his opponents. Perhaps my favorite is a story about one Easter morning during apartheid. The regime sent soldiers into the Cathedral with rifles. The people were terrified that he would say something in his sermon about apartheid and he would be shot. They were also frightened that he would be intimidated into silence because that would mean that the regime had won. Bishop Tutu responded first by laughing uproariously, like a child, and then by calling out to the soldiers: "Little brothers, you know our God is a God of Justice, the God of the Exodus. You know that we are going to win. We don't want you to miss a moment of the celebration because the party would not be complete without you. Join us now!" He went on to preach fiercely against apartheid and no one shot him. He had evoked their sense of connection with him and perhaps with the people in that sanctuary.¹⁷

In my work in the arena of faith-rooted organizing and biblically based public policy advocacy, I have had multiple experiences of the power of the active integration of serpent and dove power. In San Diego, California, the organization I directed was part of a campaign for living wage legislation, which would have a major impact on working poor immigrant families. We had a broad and passionate coalition with a strong and reasonable case. We were going, like the widow, every week for the public commentary period before the City Council meeting, and we had convinced forty percent of the members of the Council, but the others had been heavily invested in to vote against us. Our coalition members decided that it was time to stop talking and start praying. When it was their turn to go up and take the microphone, they did not present an argument for the policy. Instead, they just

¹⁷ Jim Wallis recounts a version of this story in *The (Un) Common Good* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2013–2014), 278. I have also personally heard other versions from South Africans when I participated in leading training at the Warehouse in Capetown in March 2017.

prayed aloud—sometimes for working poor families whom they knew, sometimes for City Council members. One Tuesday night, a conservative evangelical member of the City Council who had been invested in to vote against the policy suddenly changed his vote and the coalition won. When a journalist afterwards asked him why he voted for the policy, he said that he could not take being prayed for one more week. He had armor against the talking points but not against the prayer. The prayer got underneath his armor, and he had to wrestle with his God. The end result was that he took a significant risk to follow his conscience.

Those with little objective societal power looking at the world with serpent shrewdness might not see themselves as capable of impacting legislators. However, if they believe in the power of the dove, particularly if they take seriously the verses that speak to the last being first, they might see a vision of how they can have impact that inspires them to step forward. We were visiting a very anti-immigrant legislator in Central California to talk about immigration reform. We were acting on our serpent shrewdness by bringing powerful and wealthy agricultural industry leaders who wanted to be able to obtain legal status for their employees. However, we also brought a young Dreamer (someone who was brought to this country as a small child). Because she believed in dove power, she was emboldened to share the story of her family. When she shared about the faith of her mother, she cried. The legislator, an evangelical Christian, was stunned and emotionally moved. He moved from being an active leader against immigration reform efforts to a more neutral position.

Alfredo and Rene have never had the opportunity to learn the formal tactics of serpent shrewdness or to encounter dove power. As they face a society and an asylum system now that neither sees nor values them accurately, they might need to learn all the facets of the shrewd power of the serpent and the innocent power of the dove in order to save their children. Their vibrant and grounded faith in the power of God provides an excellent foundation to build on.

Conclusion: Implications—Spiritual Power and Social Justice

Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez, the well-known liberation theologian from Peru, talks about the real world impact of the faith of the oppressed in the power of God:

The poor know that history is theirs. They know that if they must cry today, tomorrow they shall laugh (cf. Luke 6:21). And they are discovering that “laughter” is an expression of deep confidence in the Lord, the confidence we find in the songs of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1–10) and Mary (Luke 1), the confidence of the poor who live in the midst of a history they seek to transform. It is a subversive gladness—subversive of the world of oppression and this is why it disquiets dominators. For it denounces the fear of the waverers and reveals the love of the God of hope.¹⁸

How does the power of God work through us and in spite of us in mission to an unjust world? We all have much to learn from the Pentecostal movements in the global south, from Central American refugees, from oppressed Christians with a vibrant living faith in the power of God. As Alfredo and Rene typify, these brothers and sisters know how to hold and live the paradox of the power of God in the in-between age. At their best, they dance with the Holy Spirit, fluidly integrating the transcendent and incarnational, the individual and collective, the present and not yet, and potentially—the serpent and the dove.

These gifts do not automatically turn every Central American refugee or every Latin American Christian into a community organizer. The process of faith-rooted organizing is arduous and requires trained and equipped volunteers who are formed over time into a well-equipped team. Faith-rooted organizing is also not always effective in achieving social justice. I have been a leader in the struggle for immigrant justice for more than thirty

¹⁸ Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (New York: Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1983), 107.

years, locally and nationally. We are far from our goal. However, reflecting on and drawing on the experiences of spiritual power that are common in Latinx circles could strengthen efforts for social justice. These perspectives and experiences can provide a unique contribution to the broader coalitions and movements for social justice, manifesting holistic mission, creating a testimony to the power and love of God.

What does a Christian Hispanic perspective on power have to offer to the process of attaining a more just society? First, the faith that the power of the Holy Spirit is available and active in responding to injustice opens up new potential resources for the struggle for justice. Second, a less compartmentalized view of life in a more collective culture takes down the barriers that keep us from utilizing all our resources, revealing a broader picture of power that challenges existing power relations. We can see and respond to the fluid movement of power between transcendent and incarnate power, individual and collective power, power that is present and not-yet, and power rooted in the shrewd mind of the serpent and the innocent heart of the dove.

Years ago, I was facilitating a faith-rooted organizing training in a liberal church. A secular Jewish union organizer was also in attendance. At one point, the group was arguing about whether or not they should cite Scripture in a conversation with a public official. The general consensus was that this would not be professional and that it would be an inappropriate use of religion in the public square. The Jewish organizer spoke up, saying that the training was the first time he had ever heard the scriptural passages that they were referring to, and that although he did not believe them, he found them to be deeply moving. He asked, "Why wouldn't you use all of your power?" If the impact on children and other vulnerable people of social injustice is truly the center of our concern, then we need to use all of the power that we have in order to respond. A Hispanic Christian view of power unleashes the power that comes with naming and evoking the potential for a deeper relationship with the Holy Spirit in our organizing for social justice.