



CBF Book Discussion Guide

by Heidi Elizabeth Lepe



Brown Church: Five Centuries of Latina/o Social Justice, Theology and Identity

By Robert Chao Romero

Overview

Brown Church, by author Robert Chao Romero, is an introduction to the social justice journeys and theologies of Latina/os across Latin America and the United States during the past five centuries. As an associate professor in the Department of Chicana/o Studies and Asian American Studies at the University of California at Los Angeles, Romero weaves together the historical, spiritual and cultural experiences and struggles of Latina/os from the time period of the colonial conquest of the Americas to the political climate of our present day in the U.S.

The author presents us with brown historical figures that we may not read or learn about in an academic and/or ecclesiastical setting. Throughout the book, these figures, early theologians, and activists at the intersections of faith and justice, teach us of a Gospel that is holistic and

liberating for the Brown Church that has faced oppression and dehumanization by political, social and religious powers in Latin America and the U.S. *Brown Church* presents us with a Jesus who was Brown, *Jesús* from the *barrio* (hood). Through this Jesus of Galilee and the presented historical Latina/o faith leaders, we see life at the margins and see what God reveals to us about his people. We learn what it means to decolonize our faith from the *ropa anglosajón* (white or anglo-saxon clothing) and embrace the faith of our forefathers and mothers that held firmly the values and traditions of our community cultural wealth and spiritual capital.

In the following section, use the discussion questions to help foster reflection and commentary as each chapter of the book, *Brown Church*, is considered. Readers are encouraged to reflect in a group setting in order to learn in the best way possible, together, *en conjunto*.

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Book Discussion Questions

Introduction

1. According to author Robert Chao Romero, what is a crucial component of Latina/o community cultural wealth? What correlation does this component have with the main ideas presented in the introduction of the book, *Brown Church*?
2. The author writes, “When God chose to dwell among us, to take on human flesh, and make our suffering his own, he chose to be Brown.” After realizing that Jesus was brown, has your understanding of God and people changed? If so, please share how.
3. The author concludes the introductory chapter with the poem, “The Brown Church.” What lines in this poem stood out to you? Why? What do you anticipate learning and exploring throughout your reading of this book?

Chapter 1

1. Describe the three major responses to the oppression of Roman colonialism that occurred in Jesus’ day. According to author Robert Chao Romero, how do we see these three responses reflected in the Latina/o community today? How can we engage members in our own church community in a way that will leave no room for these three major responses?
2. Romero writes, “To change the system, Jesus had to start with those who were excluded from the system.” What does this mean in regard to the demographic and social location of Galilee as presented in Chapter 1?
3. How does Latino theologian René Padilla define *misión integral*? Why is this term significant when addressing the social ills and brokenness in our communities? How can the concept of *misión integral* lead to further reconciliation and transformation in your own neighborhood?
4. According to the author, what is Jesus’ “Nazareth Manifesto”? What do the Beatitudes and the Nazareth Manifesto reveal about God’s heart? How does this understanding of God’s heart impact the way you see those who are different from you?

Chapter 2

1. According to Chapter 2, how did Bartolomé de Las Casas experience his first conversion? How does this conversion relate to the concept of *concientización* as defined by Paulo Freire?
2. Have you had an experience of *concientización* with a particular social issue? How has it influenced your decisions and your life afterwards when approaching the social issue?
3. In what way was the codification of the Law of Burgos critical towards the role of racism in the Americas? What concepts, categories and rationality did these laws create? How can members of faith communities work today to eliminate current harmful legislative efforts that uphold racism, sexism, classism and xenophobia in the public sphere?
4. What was *El Requerimiento* in 1513 and how did this document help the Spanish conquest of the Americas? How did European colonizers use this document to manipulate religion in constructing colonial theologies of conquest?
5. Have you seen the Church in the U.S. historically and presently justify the oppression, exploitation and dehumanization of others in this country? As the body of Christ, how can we combat and correct these wrongs?
6. How did La Virgen de Guadalupe indigenize Mexican Catholicism? What does she symbolize for indigenous peoples and for the Latina/o communities in the United States today? How does La Virgen defy *machismo* (patriarchy)?

Chapter 3

1. What was the New Spain caste system? How did idolatry lie at the center of the caste system?
2. Chapter 3 states that Christianity conflated with the Spanish culture during the colonial period of the Americas. Have you seen Christianity conflate in a similar way with nationalism in the United States today and, if so, how?

3. What three distinct contributions did Garcilaso de la Vega make to the Brown Church in his publications, *Royal Commentaries of the Incas and General History of Peru*? Can you name other ways in which de la Vega, in Chapter 3, elevates the culture of the indigenous peoples?
4. What made Felipe Guaman Poma a monumental indigenous prophet of the Brown Church? How did he defy the argument of the need for evangelism/conversion upon the Inca people of Peru during his time? How does Guaman Poma's prophetic voice and writings influence your own view of evangelism and missionary work in other countries?
5. Why was Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz considered the first feminist and female theologian of the Americas? What does her life journey in the academy and Church teach us about Latinas pursuing a vocation in each of these institutions? How can we support Latinas in theological studies and promote a framework of theological egalitarianism in our church communities today?

Chapter 4

1. What is the theology of Manifest Destiny? Through this corrupt theology, how did civil religion and religious clergy work in a symbiotic relationship?
2. How did the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo grant Mexicans "halfway" citizenship? In spite of this ambiguity, in 1849 the Californios utilized their privilege to gain citizenship. How is privilege related to the concepts of assimilation and whiteness? How can you use your privilege to create opportunities and leverage for underrepresented communities to lead at the forefront of their equity?
3. According to Chapter 4, what was the spiritual conquest and how did new ecclesiastical authority play a role in this conquest? Can you describe how Native New Mexican priest Padre Antonio José Martínez challenged Anglo religious colonialism?

Chapter 5

1. Author Robert Chao Romero affirms that in the Mexican American and greater Latino communities, our *abuelitas* (grandmothers) and *madrecitas* (mothers) are our best theologians. This idea is coined through the term "Abuelita Theology." Can you share how Abuelita Theology influenced the life of Cesar Chavez from his early years to his time leading the United Farmworkers Movement? Can you name ways in which Abuelita Theology has influenced your own life through maternal spiritual figures in your own family?
2. What spiritual elements distinguished the United Farmworkers Movement from a secular movement of activism? How was the United Farmworkers Movement more than just activism?

3. Although Chavez was an affirming Catholic, he collaborated with the Pentecostal community and Protestant California Migrant Ministry to accomplish his faith-based activism. Is there a local organization/church outside your affiliation with which you might collaborate to carry out the justice work in your community?

Chapter 6

1. In chapter six, liberation theologians parallel the suffering of the poor of Latin America to certain biblical instances. Can you name these biblical comparisons? How does God's liberation bring life? How can God's liberation bring life to our social issues today in the United States?
2. In this chapter, the acronym "BCC" is presented to the reader. What does BCC stand for and what was their mission/goal in local Latin American church communities? How can a ministry in your local church form a model similar to BCC?
3. What distinguished the Protestant evangelical practice of *Misión Integral* from the Catholic practice of liberation theology? What four distinctions characterized the Latin American evangelical theology?

Chapter 7

1. What was Archbishop Romero's first act of prophetic witness and how did it challenge the socioeconomic divide of El Salvador?
2. How did Archbishop Romero use the biblical truth of the image of Christ to preach a God of justice and salvation to the rural poor of El Salvador? How did he use the biblical truth of Christ as Liberator to preach to the rural poor of El Salvador? Do you view salvation and the gospel differently after reading this chapter? If so, what has changed?
3. What biblical reading did Archbishop Romero administer on his last day? In what way did this reading encourage us to follow the model of Christ, his body and blood? How has his legacy impacted your journey on following Christ?

Chapter 8

1. This chapter introduces us to the term of reading the Bible with "Hispanic eyes" as coined by Latino theologian Justo González. What does this mean and why is it important to recognize the role of our ethnic culture in biblical interpretation? If we do not embrace this diverse notion, what can result in our local and global church?
2. In Pentecostal Latina/o theology, how does speaking in tongues and the baptism of the Holy Spirit lead individuals to multicultural communities, proclamation of good news to the poor, and the enactment of justice for all who are oppressed?

3. How does the Holy Spirit play an active role in decolonizing Latin America according to Oscar García-Johnson? What Pentecostal theological imaginations can we use in our communities to further faith-rooted justice work?
4. Can you give examples of how U.S. Latinas have played a role in the theological frameworks of recent social justice theologies drawing from both the Catholic and Protestant tradition? How can we use the contributions of these Latina theologians in our own church communities and social justice work?

Conclusion

1. In what way is the Latina/o community of the United States like the Israelites of three thousand years ago? Have you seen current faith leaders rise to challenge the oppression of the empire today in the same spirit as Moses, Miriam and Aaron? How have you been encouraged to challenge the empire today as you conclude your reading of *Brown Church*?
2. What does the author mean when he shares, “Está subiendo la Raza?” What steps can the church in the United States take to become a beloved community and no longer remain separated from the Brown Church? How can we highlight Latina/o theologies, theologians, faith leaders and activists at the intersections of faith and justice in our institutions?



Further Reading

Recommended Readings:

- *Mañana* by Justo L. González
- *Latina Evangélicas* by Loida I. Martell, Zaida Maldonado Perez, Elizabeth Conde-Frazier
- *The God Who Sees* by Karen González
- *The Next Worship* by Sandra Maria Van Opstal
- *The God of Life* by Gustavo Gutiérrez

Social justice/faith advocacy groups:

- Al Otro Lado, www.alotrolado.org
- Bread for the World, www.bread.org
- CBF Advocacy, www.cbf.net/advocacy
- Chasing Justice, www.chasingjustice.com
- Christians for Social Action (CSA), www.christiansforsocialaction.org
- Evangelical Immigration Table, www.evangelicalimmigrationtable.com
- Matthew 25 So Cal, www.matthew25socal.org/english-home

Opportunities to learn/engage in conversation with Brown Church/latina/o theologians:

- AETH, www.aeth.org/
- AETH Young Líderes Facebook Group Page, www.facebook.com/groups/younglideres
- Afrolatin@ forum, www.afrolatinoforum.org
- CBF Familia, www.cbf.net/familia
- Shetheordinary, www.shetheordinary.com
- Glocal Theology, www.glocaltheology.com/
- World Outspoken, www.worldoutspoken.com
- Forum for Theological Exploration, www.ftheleaders.org
- Migration Christian Conference, www.facebook.com/MygrationChristianConference
- Publica Theology, www.publicatheology.org
- Passion2Plant, www.passion2plant.com
- Rev. Dr. Robert Chao Romero, www.robertchaoromero.com



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