

# WYF\_Ep94\_BestOf\_JustoGonzález

**Rasool Berry:** [00:00:00] Hey y'all, it's Rasool Berry. Thanks for joining me on this special *Best of Where Ya From?* episode. We went back and selected some of our favorite conversations to share with you, so that no matter when you started listening to *Where Ya From?*, you could check them out. Today, I wanted to share our episode with Dr. Justo González.

Dr. González is a living legend, and to sit down and talk with him was an honor. I mean, how many times do you get to talk to someone who studied under Karl Barth *and* translated for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.? What inspired me the most, besides the astonishing things he had accomplished over his career, was to hear him still be so passionate about what theology can do for the poor. On top of that, he is a funny dude.

So thanks for listening and enjoy this *Best of Where Ya From?* with Dr. Justo González.

**Dr. Justo González:** Well in the summer after Castro came and everybody was like super happy about every good thing that's happening and so on. [00:01:00] There was a whole lot of violence already. I mean, shooting all the people who had been for the previous regime, and some people who hadn't been but were accused of having been.

You know, it took me so long to get out because we had to fill so many papers to get back to Yale. That next Christmas I didn't go home because I was afraid that I would not be able to come back in time for classes. So that means that my last visit to Cuba for years and years were in '59.

**Rasool Berry:** This is *Where Ya From?*, an origin story podcast at the intersection of faith and culture that digs into the influences and experiences that shape who we are today. Join us as we gain insight into the Bible's wisdom for all—regardless of where we're from.

Hey y'all, this is Rasool Berry. Thanks for joining me on *Where Ya From?*. Yo. I am still in awe that I get to share with you my conversation with the one, and only, the legend, Dr. Justo [00:02:00] González. Just to name all that he has accomplished would be a podcast in itself. But let me just give you a few pieces. Dr. González has been a leading church historian and theologian who has amplified the voice of the Hispanic church for over 30 years.

He has lectured and taught at the most influential theological institutions around the world. He has also written over a hundred books, perhaps the best known of

which are *The History of Christianity* and *History of Christian Thought*. Dr. Gonzales was also involved in the founding of AETH, the Association for Hispanic Theological Education, as well as the Hispanic Theological Initiative and the Hispanic Summer Program.

You can find out more about Dr. Gonzales and AETH in the show notes, or by going to [whereyafrom.org](http://whereyafrom.org). That's where, y-a, from dot o-r-g. Please join me as I ask Dr. Justo Gonzales, where ya from?

**Dr. Justo González:** I was born in Cuba. I [00:03:00] grew up in Cuba most of my early life and went to school there and went to seminary there and then came to the U.S. to study, and then history took over.

**Rasool Berry:** Were you the only child in your family or did you have other siblings? Where were you in the birth order?

**Dr. Justo González:** Well, there were two brothers. My older brother, who was five years older than myself, we rented a big, huge place in the upstairs of a furniture factory. And, and that meant that whenever anybody, aunts, uncles, whatever it needed a place to be, they came to our place.

So, there were just four of us in what you would call a nuclear family now, but there were always a couple of aunts and uncles and cousins. But, uh, both my father and my mother were sort of the mainstays of their own sides of the family. So whenever one of their brothers or sisters needed some help, they came to us. So it was, it was a fun place.

**Rasool Berry:** Okay, great. So it sounds like that must have been a really fun environment to grow up [00:04:00] with just playmates all around and all the time. What about your parents? Tell me a little bit about them.

**Dr. Justo González:** My parents, uh, eventually were both ordained United Methodist ministers. My father was a revolutionary. He grew up, uh, very much influenced by Trotsky and Trotskyism. And, uh, he always had that sort of left leaning inclination in him, which didn't ever come to being in favor of Castro, but he always felt that social change was necessary. And, uh, he worked to that, uh, when the revolution in which he was one of the leaders won and he was offered any position he wanted, he said, well, no, what I want is in the Department of Agriculture. I want to have an office whose job would be to talk to all the scientists, and then write that in ways that peasants can use it.

And so that was always his, his, his, his thing. How do you make knowledge available [00:05:00] to people who really can use it and improve their lives with

it? And, uh, my mother was an educator. She was the principal of the school where I went for all my primary education.

That's how I got to go there, because it was a very expensive private school, which we could never have afforded. But later, uh, after, uh, the revolution, when they left Cuba and they settled in Costa Rica, where they began a program of, uh, literacy. They have been dead now for quite a few years, but still the program is booming all over Latin America, and in Africa. And they have millions of people learning how to read. And that's part of their heritage.

**Rasool Berry:** Wow, that's fascinating. So there's a history of both education and social impact that I can still see in you. So, you know, help me understand like the big moment, you know, in the, in the fifties going into the sixties is the Cuban revolution.

But a lot of us don't understand what was the social context out of which that [00:06:00] moment emerges. So maybe if you could paint a picture, what was it like to grow up in the pre-revolution Cuba? And maybe what were some of the issues that were going on that made it, you know, receptive or susceptible to what happened afterwards?

**Dr. Justo González:** Well, I think, uh, it's a very complicated issue. And let me tell you for many years, I did not talk about that because when people ask me about the Cuban revolution, they really were asking me, it was not about the revolution, they were asking me about myself. So they could classify me and figure out who I was. So they said, what do you think about Castro? But they really want to know is, who are you?

**Rasool Berry:** Got it.

**Dr. Justo González:** The, the political situation in Cuba before Castro was very bad. In some ways, it was a colony of the U. S. There were all kinds of issues that people were very unhappy about, both in the international scene and in the national scene. In the national scene, nobody ever lost an election. If you lost an election, you said you didn't lose, and you kept on fighting, and that [00:07:00] meant that you could never have a working government. Uh, because there was always somebody who was saying no, that's not a legitimate government. And then we had a coup d'etat where Batista took over and he was very much supported by the U.S.

And that created some stronger feelings about the U. S. And, uh, there was a widespread corruption in government, and in industry, and in economics and in everything. Uh, it was just a matter of who had money to be able to make more

money. And minorities, mostly people of African descent and also peasants, uh, who are mostly of Spanish descent and Indian descent, but mostly Spanish. And, uh, they were very much at the edge of everything and had no voice. And when Castro came saying that he was going to give him a voice, obviously that was very popular and he gained a great deal of power out of that.

**Rasool Berry:** Do you remember, you know, as a 10, 15 year old, 18 year old, did you feel like the country was in tension or were you [00:08:00] not really aware of it at the time?

**Dr. Justo González:** Oh yes. Yeah, you felt it in several ways. Every once in a while there was a shooting. You knew as a kid that if somebody with a military uniform came by and said anything to you, you better take it. Because, uh, otherwise you were in deep trouble. I knew other friends who would be walking down the street with a girl and some man with a uniform would come and start saying all kinds of improper things to her. And there was nothing you could do about it, you know. So you saw it in little things.

**Rasool Berry:** Yeah. Yeah. So in the midst of that, obviously your parents were ministers, so you grew up in a church in a Christian environment, but was there a moment where the faith became real to you?

**Dr. Justo González:** Yeah. Yeah. I was a teenager, and I had heard, uh, I don't know how many evangelistic preachers, And I don't know how many times I've gone up to the altar and all that kind of thing.

And, uh, then one day in school, a classmate who was not particularly [00:09:00] known for his virtue or his good behavior or his orderly life came and said, "Hey, I hear that you are a Protestant. What's that about?" And we sat in the library. We're not supposed to talk, but we talked. And I told him the sermon that I had heard all the time.

And it worked! And he changed, and I said, "Hey, you know, this is for real." And that's why I've always found the story of Peter and Cornelius so significant, because Peter has no idea what he's doing, but when he sees that it works in Cornelius, something happens to him.

**Rasool Berry:** That, that's so interesting, though. It's almost like part of your story of coming to a deeper faith involves you sharing with someone else coming to a deeper faith, too.

**Dr. Justo González:** That's right. That's right. Yeah.

**Rasool Berry:** So you said you were in your teenage years when that happened. At what point do you decide to study, you know, theology?

**Dr. Justo González:** A couple of years after that. And, uh, so then, then I went over to seminary in Cuba. There, [00:10:00] there is a united seminary there that at that point was run mostly by the Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Methodists. And that's where I went to seminary.

**Rasool Berry:** So in the midst of that, because there's so much civil unrest going on. You know, you have a father who clearly is interested in social impact and social change. Did that trickle down into you, or why did you think seminary and theology was important for you to study?

**Dr. Justo González:** At that point, at the very beginning, I was more interested in being a minister than in studying. I went to seminary because that's what the church required. And while I was there, many, many things happened that changed my life in many ways. But, uh, I did not go to the seminary because I wanted to study. I must say I did want to study in a sense.

My brother also was in seminary and he was two years ahead of me. He would come home and tell us stories about things and so on, about what he was telling us. I found some of that [00:11:00] fascinating. And sometimes it got me into trouble.

Let me tell you a story. At that time, the Methodist Church in Cuba was united with the Methodist Church in Florida. So the Bishop of Florida was also the Bishop of Cuba. And, uh, he was visiting and he was having dinner with us at, uh, house. And he said that he had to go back to Florida because he had to make appointments. And that was very difficult because he had to figure salaries. And some big churches wanted certain pastors and, and how he worked that and we got that together.

And being still a teenager, I said, "You know, my brother's telling me about this thing that they were studying in seminary about when people would buy positions, you know, to have churches. And then, you know, people become a bishop by buying the bishopric or become a pastor by buying the parish. And they said that they call that simony. And what difference is there between a pastor buying a church, and a church buying a pastor?" And I got the biggest kick under the table.[00:12:00]

**Rasool Berry:** And you weren't even trying to cause trouble, you just, you're natural. . .

**Dr. Justo González:** I was just saying I wanted to understand.

**Rasool Berry:** Was there any response?

**Dr. Justo González:** No, no. Well, the weather is not bad. . .

**Rasool Berry:** Oh, okay. So you said that there were some big things happening in the seminary. What were the things that were happening?

**Dr. Justo González:** Well, the things that were happening in the seminary, several things happened.

I mean, when you're talking about political issues and so on, I was in the second year in seminary when a group of revolutionaries attacked a military place just below the hill from the seminary. And we could see from up there. and we were peeking over the walls, and seeing people, uh, running and shooting and all that.

And next morning there were all these pictures, all these people who have been killed and you could still hear, uh, the hunting of people who are now fugitive all over the city. So obviously that does something to [00:13:00] you about what you understand and so on. Uh, it was also in seminary that I became interested in history.

My least favorite subject when I was a student, ever before that, was history. I hated history. And it was in seminary that I became interested in history. So I think those two things were combined, were part of it.

**Rasool Berry:** What changed that made a subject that you previously hated something that you were now interested in?

**Dr. Justo González:** A man who later was my professor, whose name was Karl Barth. He wrote a big book that's called the *Church Dogmatics*, and I began reading that in my first year in seminary. And the very first page, he quoted all kinds of people that I had no idea who they were. And I went back and began finding, who are these people?

And I found they were interesting. There were all kinds of things that he was not just thinking out of his head, he was thinking within a tradition. He was connected with a wide variety of people in the past that somehow shaped him. And he knew how they had [00:14:00] shaped him and so on. And I said, you know, it seems like the only way you can really not just do theology, but the only way you can really understand yourself is through history. And so I began

getting interested in history, and that, that was basically where I began moving in that direction.

**Rasool Berry:** Those are two very significant moments happening at the same time, the social unrest in Cuba, and this light bulb that goes off in your own mind about the importance of history. At that time, do you think that they were related? Was there some depth of you wanting to understand history to understand the, maybe, chaos that was happening around you?

**Dr. Justo González:** I think so, because you cannot understand what was going on without going back several generations in Cuba itself, you know. And decisions have been made years and years before that now were affecting what was happening. So, yes, that's why history was not just a history of ideas, which was what I got from Barth mostly. It's also the history of social relations and events and how people [00:15:00] organize society and so on.

**Rasool Berry:** Got it. Okay. So you get this fascination with history, and this is literally happening at the same time that this revolution is taking place in your own backyard. Literally in the backyard of the seminary that you're in. How does what is happening in Cuba, maybe shape or effect what you do once you finish seminary yourself.

**Dr. Justo González:** Well in a very practical way, perhaps, because so many things that happened when I was about to graduate. The cabinet, uh, you know, the Methodist Church is run by the bishop and his cabinet.

**Rasool Berry:** Mmhmm

**Dr. Justo González:** And, uh, the cabinet called me and they said, we have decided, you know, you're supposed to be appointed someplace, so we have decided to appoint you to study. Yeah. I, I suppose I had something to do with my grades and my work at seminary, but I think it also had to do with my rather radical preaching that I had begun to develop after those events.

The week after that big shootout, I went, uh, and, and preached on [00:16:00] the need for a revolution, meaning all kinds of things. I probably wouldn't have said exactly the same thing now, but I think they were not only thinking that I should be teaching, but they also were afraid of what I might do, what might happen to me. So they sent me to study abroad and, uh, I came to Yale because I was just obeying the bishop.

**Rasool Berry:** Wow. That's quite a sermon, a sermon that moves you from Cuba to Yale. Um, so you get to Yale and I mean, that's an extraordinary

different cultural set of circumstances. Connecticut, New Haven to Havana, Cuba. Tell us about what your experiences were. I don't know, had you ever been to the States before and what was it like to be there?

**Dr. Justo González:** Yeah, I have been to the States before because my parents were both educators, also. And, uh, the schools where they taught, uh, most of the students were pretty high class, uh, socially.

And so that we could do it, [00:17:00] every year they will bring a plane load of Cuban kids to summer camp in North Carolina. So we will spend, uh, oh, a couple of months, in the mountains of North Carolina. So if you want me to call, I say, square dance for you, I can. Round a couple, take a little peek back to the center and swing your sweet, because I grew up with that.

So, so I have been in the States before. But you know, as a kid, uh, mostly to play, to be in the summer camp. Uh, and the difference here was basically, I was younger than most of my classmates at Yale. And, uh, New Haven now is not what it was then. At that point, to find somebody in New Haven who spoke Spanish, you had to do quite a bit of looking.

Uh, when I said I was from Cuba, people would say, where's that? You know. So, it's a different experience. I never felt at Yale that I was in any way discriminated. Now in town, yes. [00:18:00] In town, you go into a store and start looking around and somebody could always come and say, "May I help you?" And what they really meant, you could say, is, what are you doing here? You know, I'm watching you. So, you know that, that kind of experience.

Yeah. So, that was there. It was also different in the sense that I thought, I was wrong, but I thought that I knew exactly what was going to happen in the rest of my life. I had been told by the cabinet I was going to come back, and I was going to be a pastor for a few years, and then they were going to put me in the seminary.

That was what they had sent me to Yale. And so I knew I was going to be a teacher in the seminary where I studied. I'll go home every Christmas and summer. And I went back to Cuba in the summer after Castro came, and everybody was like exuberant about every good things are happening and so on. There was a whole lot of violence already.

I mean, shooting all the people who have been for the previous regime, and some people who hadn't been, but were accused of having been, you know. It took me so long to get out because we had to fill so many papers to [00:19:00] get back to Yale. That next Christmas I didn't go home because I was afraid that



I would not be able to come back in time for classes. So that means that my last visit to Cuba for years and years were in, uh '59. So six months after Castro had one.

I was finishing, uh, I'm still trying to go back to Cuba. I was just finishing my dissertation when the CIA had the idea to invade Cuba. And, uh, they failed. And, uh, but at that point it meant that I couldn't go back to Cuba because the government didn't want people who had been polluted by living in the States for so long to go back to Cuba. And so, uh, I wrote a bunch of seminaries in Latin America to see where I could go. I ended up in Puerto Rico. and I was there for eight years before I came to the States.

**Rasool Berry:** Wow. So in a very real way, these international incidents that literally impacted your life because you could not then go back to your country as much [00:20:00] anymore. And it sounds like there was this development of the new reality of what Cuba was going to be. It wasn't immediate. That there was this awareness, okay, Castro's taken over, so it's going to be what we now know. It seemed like it developed over time.

**Dr. Justo González:** Yes, yes, it took a while for all those things to, to happen. And, uh, there was a time when it was very difficult to be critical at all, even among your friends, because friends had different degrees of awareness of what was going on. And whatever you said was going to offend somebody.

**Rasool Berry:** Gotcha.

**Dr. Justo González:** And there was a great deal of hot blood about the issues that were going on with good reason. So, it's funny because so many people that I argue about, when I began having some critical views of it, a week or a month after that went in exile. Because people were changing all the time.

**Rasool Berry:** Now, in the midst of that, you mentioned earlier that you had the opportunity to study with [00:21:00] another theological heavyweight, Karl Barth. When did that happen, and what was that experience like for you?

**Dr. Justo González:** Well, after my second year at Yale, the War Council of Churches and the War Student Confederation had a scholarship that they had from Strasburg. So I went to spend a year there in Strasburg. Well, Strasburg is about two hours by train from Basel, and Karl Barth was in Basel. So I would just go to seminars there every week for a year.

**Rasool Berry:** Wow. And did you just kind of reach out to Karl Barth, or how did you end up meeting him?

**Dr. Justo González:** Well, uh, as a student at Strasburg, I had the student federation contact, uh, the people at the University of Basel. And we met every week in a, in a, in a pub. Uh, I mean, he, he had a seminar, but the seminar met in a pub. There was a room that you close the doors for people. I mean, it would be noisy. And, uh, you sat there and talked about whatever he was [00:22:00] doing.

**Rasool Berry:** I mean, that must've been a treat for you, you know. You had studied or read *Church Dogmatics*, and now you're sitting there at a pub talking across the table with the guy who wrote it.

**Dr. Justo González:** Well, I have had the opportunity to meet some very interesting people. I mean, and that's been none of my doing. I once, I once got to spend a week with Martin Luther King. Because somebody arranged, uh, for him to come and visit Puerto Rico and I was teaching there, and I was his interpreter. So . . .

**Rasool Berry:** Okay, I, I can't just let that go. What was that experience like and what did you learn about him or what did he learn about Puerto Rico?

**Dr. Justo González:** Well, several things. Uh, on the more serious side, the thing that I remember mostly because of what happened later. The apartment where we were staying was right next door to mine. So we were sitting in the little living room to his apartment. He and C. T. Vivian, who had come with him. And, uh, he started talking about the Vietnam War and that it was not just an issue of [00:23:00] race, it was also an issue of class. And he had to be concerned not only about black people, but also about poor people.

Because there's a clear connection, but it's not just race. There's all the other issues going on. And he was going to plan to bring poor people into the movement. And I remember C. T. Vivian saying, "Martin, that's going to cost you." And he said, "I know, but I have to do it." And as you know, very shortly after that when he was organizing the march for the poor, he was killed.

So, uh, I felt that somehow those words were somewhat a sign of profound dedication, and a willingness to do what had to be done no matter what. On the other side, let me tell you, translating for him was a pain because as you know, when he spoke, it was like Niagara Falls, you know. Just running water constantly.

I was supposed to be translating for him. So I had to pull his jacket and pull and pull. So, so he, he shut up [00:24:00] for a moment. Let me catch up with him. So that's the other side, the other side of that.

**Rasool Berry:** I, uh, that's now, yeah, I can imagine trying to translate for the most prolific order of the 20th century, who has soaring vocabulary and words. And the cadence to it too. So he doesn't want to stop. Right?

**Dr. Justo González:** That's right. That's right. The, uh, he just, he's just going and going. And that's hard to remember every one of those faces that were building up to something.

**Rasool Berry:** Okay, so let me ask you about this, because one of the things that also has emerged and has had tensions but also solidarity is the relationship between the black struggle and race in the Latin and Hispanic context, you know. So what did that look like in terms of the black and brown relationship and maybe this conversation that's happening in Puerto Rico? So he's now in a brown context, but he's also known as being this icon talking about civil rights more in the African American context.

**Dr. Justo González:** Well, I think [00:25:00] it made it clear to me that we have to be aware of the divide and conquer strategy. It's not a question of one minority group against the other minority group.

It's the question of all minority groups together facing organizations and structures and practices and traditions that somehow, uh, limit and oppress them. And that part of what worries me, well let me tell you, when I saw a cover years ago of *Time Magazine* that said, "Hispanics, the New Great Minority" what I really heard saying was, "Watch out you black people, here come the Hispanics."

That was what I heard, you know, the establishment of *Time Magazine* or whatever is behind it actually saying. I know that there are tensions, there are reasons for tensions. Because, you know, when there's just a few crumbs, everybody fights for them. [00:26:00] But you have to get beyond the place of just having the crumbs.

**Rasool Berry:** . When we come back, Dr. González will share how his awareness of his own story and Hispanic culture opened up the Bible and Christian history in new and surprising ways. That's coming next on *Where You're From?*.

Now let's get back into our conversation with Dr. Justo González on *Where You're From?*.

. . .from your formation and seminary. So, you know, you've been at Yale and, uh, also at University of Strasburg. How did that start to help you integrate the

faith or theological aspect of what you believed with the need and the importance of speaking to the social problems that you were seeing around you?

**Dr. Justo González:** Well, I think part of what happened was all of that also helped me begin to look at history in a different way. What I studied at Yale originally was the History of Christian Thought, and it was all about [00:27:00] theology. And as I reflected on all those issues later, it became very clear to me that Christian thought doesn't take place in its own vacuum.

That there is a social, political, economic context, and that thought very often reflects that. And that, uh, you cannot do theology outside of a social political structure. And you have to acknowledge that and you have to see how that affects you and how that affects whoever you're reading. So I think, yeah, there was quite a bit of influence there.

**Rasool Berry:** Yeah, you wrote in *The Story of Christianity*, which is a seminary textbook that's used very widely, that the notion that we read the New Testament exactly as the early Christians did, without any weight of tradition, coloring our interpretation is an illusion. It's also a dangerous illusion, for it tends to absolutize our interpretation, confusing it with God's Word.

**Dr. Justo González:** Yeah.

**Rasool Berry:** How did you [00:28:00] see that tendency, that danger of not understanding history in its context, in terms of how we thought about theology? How did you see that play out around you?

**Dr. Justo González:** Well, I could tell you different things. I could go into some much more scholarly answers. But let me tell you, just experientially, I had two experiences that helped me see that my reading of Scripture was very much connected with the context.

And they both happened almost at the same time. I was in Puerto Rico teaching and I was invited to preach for Holy Week at a very large United Methodist Church in Florida. At that time, one of the largest churches in the whole country. And I had preached in English a few times, you know, to a couple of hundred people, three hundred. But to think about thousands of people, I was thinking, will these people understand me?

And it was Holy Week, so I had to preach on Peter's betrayal, among other things. And uh, I remember as a kid hearing somebody preach about that sermon and say, how did people know that Peter was one of them? Oh, [00:29:00] because if you have been with Jesus, it shows in your face. And I

remember, I must have been about eight or nine years old, I sat on the curb across the street from the church and looking at people coming out, and I decided nobody had been with Jesus.

But now I was preaching the same thing, and what am I going to say? And I start looking at that, and I say that the woman says to Peter, you are one of them, your accent betrays you. And I said, you know, they knew that he was one of them because he talked funny. He didn't talk like the Judeans, Galileans.

And I said, why is it that I never saw that before? And I said, well, it is because I was never in a situation where my accent was all that important. Now the same thing works in reading other passages. I've just been studying Calvin again for a revision I'm doing on a book. And, uh, I've been working with him as an exile.

Not as an exile when he got kicked out of Geneva, but an exile even in Geneva because he really was French, and all the difficulties he [00:30:00] had there. And how that reflects in his theology, in the way he understands communion, in the way he understands the role of the state. And yet, when we read about Calvin, we think that he's just writing as a general theologian, and there's no such thing as a general theology.

**Rasool Berry:** That's so good. And I'm just kind of curious, like, when did you start to really understand this was an important contribution to the body of Christ? For people to know how important it is for them to be aware of their history and even of the specific, you know, cultural context, or in your case, Hispanic cultural context.

How did that start to become, like, a clear thing for you to understand and then also say, I need to tell people this?

**Dr. Justo González:** Well, it was partially, uh, contact with the community and partially contact with people in other communities that, that brought similar things. From the point of view of Latin America, obviously it was a time when, uh, Gustavo Gutierrez and others were beginning to, to talk in similar [00:31:00] terms.

I mean, about how the, the social, political, economic context affects the way you think, and how theology can be used to oppress people and so on. And there was a time when, uh, Jim Cohn began making, uh, statements that were very significant about, uh, the African American experience, and how that relates to religion.

And not only in the positive sense of how it helps the African American people understand the faith, but also how they have been told ways of understanding the faith that in themselves are oppressive. And so it was that kind of conversation with those people, uh, and others. I mean, uh, some friends I have from the Philippines that were also beginning to talk about this.

It's a global thing. It's not just a Latino thing. I think the, perhaps the greatest theological discovery of the 20th century, is that all theology is contextual. And that there's no such thing as general [00:32:00] theology.

**Rasool Berry:** Do you think that it's an accurate description for it to be labeled in a specific way, like Hispanic theology or liberation theology? Or do you just look at it as theology?

**Dr. Justo González:** I don't care what it's called, as long as there's not one thing that's called theology, and another thing that's called Hispanic theology or Liberation Theology. Because every theology has adjectives. And if you're going to have what you call general theology, you should call it male white theology. If you're willing to call what you call general theology male white theology, I'm quite willing to call what we do Hispanic theology.

**Rasool Berry:** So let me, um, reflect on a common concern or critique that, you know, I've heard when we talk about theology in context, right? Some people get concerned that if we talk about all theology as contextual, does that mean that we're going [00:33:00] to a place where we're, you know, basically undermining absolute truth, or saying that there's no real specific clear perspective about who God is, that it's all just contextual. How do you respond to that?

**Dr. Justo González:** I respond by saying that the place where I most clearly meet absolute truth is in a very contextual moment in history, some 20 centuries ago, in a very contextual man, whose name is Jesus. And that if you cannot take Jesus's contextuality, you cannot take His truth either.

**Rasool Berry:** And what is some of that contextuality that you see in Jesus?

**Dr. Justo González:** Well, he's a, he's a Galilean Jew who, as a Jew, is looked at as cancered by the Roman Empire and the Greeks and the Roman culture. As a Galilean, he's looked at as cancered by the Jews. And somehow has to bring God's [00:34:00] word to all Jews and everybody around Him. And I think that is the situation of the church always.

The church is, uh, very often, it has to be living in a world where all kinds of political things impinge on it, and where social, economic issues impinge on it. And somehow you have to be able to proclaim the truth of Jesus within that context. But you don't proclaim the truth of Jesus by saying just, "Sh, Jesus is just a general figure that doesn't exist in a particular time and so on." No, no, it's a very contextual thing. And that's why, oh, the Creed makes it very clear, you know, he suffered and died under the Pontius Pilate. That means in a particular context.

**Rasool Berry:** Got it. And that reminds me, in your book, *The Mestizo Augustine*, you mention this word that you use to talk about Augustine's experience, and it sounds like maybe from what you just described, Jesus's. It's uh, mestizaje? [00:35:00]

**Dr. Justo González:** Mestizaje. Yes. Mmhmm.

**Rasool Berry:** Tell me about mestizaje, and why is that such an important concept to understand the Gospel and even, you know, people like Augustine and even the Hispanic experience?

**Dr. Justo González:** I think it's particularly important today because today Everybody's talking about purity, you know. Oh, my ancestors, you know, they're all from Scotland or from wherever. And the truth of the matter is that, uh, all the human race is all mixed up. And that race is an invention that society has used in order to justify injustices it wants to justify. So that the first thing is to understand that there's no such thing as a pure culture.

Culture is a dialogue with the environment constantly, and that environment includes other cultures. So cultures never grow out of themselves. They grow out of the [00:36:00] encounter with others.

How much of the New Testament was written in Jerusalem? Zip. How much of the New Testament was written in encounter of Christians with Jews with society and so on? All of it. So that, that encounter is crucial for human development. Now, what I was doing with Augustine, which is what people very often don't, don't see is that Augustine is partially African. His mother is African. His father is Roman.

And as so very often happens with people who are marginalized, his mother wants him to be Roman because it's going to make him move up. But she doesn't want to be too Roman, because that's going to corrupt him and not make him be a true Christian. And so when we study *The Confessions of Augustine*, that sounds like it's, it's basically, uh, an intellectual struggle. [00:37:00] It's

much more than that. It's a struggle about identity and of being able eventually to accept being a Roman African.

**Rasool Berry:** And how do you see that struggle be relevant even in your own experience, in your own story?

**Dr. Justo González:** Well, in many ways, let me tell you. When I was, uh, growing up, uh, there was such a connection between being a Protestant and being somehow connected to the U.S. That there was a certain different kind of mestizaje there. In many ways, Protestantism sort of alienated me from my own culture. Sort of. It couldn't do it fully because of the environment, because my parents, because my father was a novelist, because my mother was a professor of Spanish lit, you know, and so I had to appreciate that.

But still, there was a sense that. That so many of our problems have to do with our not being like them. And it's difficult to get out of that. But when you get [00:38:00] out of that, then you can really become yourself.

**Rasool Berry:** That's beautiful. And now, like, kind of let's expand that and talk about how you see that tension playing itself out in the Hispanic experience more broadly.

**Dr. Justo González:** Well, I see it everywhere. I, uh, talk about the Hispanics in the U. S., okay? For instance, it is quite typical of parents who don't know English too well to insist on speaking English at home so their kids will learn English. And therefore they don't learn Spanish. And then those kids are growing up and they discover they were really bilingual, they will be much more employable, they'll have all kinds of opportunities, you know. But that opportunity was missed because their parents were so concerned about helping their kids move ahead in society. That you deny who you are.

And then I see work in the other direction. I see, I see churches that have become the way of preserving the culture. [00:39:00] And so, uh, here in this church, we speak Spanish and we eat, uh, whatever it is that we eat in our country, and we behave the way we do. And obviously what happens is that kid is also going to school with kids who don't understand things the same way and eventually they say I don't have anything to do with the church. So it goes both ways

**Rasool Berry:** Wow. Yeah, I could see that. And then I think to another thing that I've experienced, I pastor a church here in Brooklyn, New York where the average age is about 28, mostly black and brown, very diverse church. And some of the things because of those tensions in those extremes that you



mentioned, A lot of people in the younger generation, Barna and Pew Research have kind of shown this, think that they need to just leave the church altogether because to be a part of it seems not to be connecting to their ethnic experience of struggle.

Is that something else that you have seen in history, or how that history connects to that idea now that Christianity is a [00:40:00] white man's religion, or that it's a part of my oppression so I need to get away from it?

**Dr. Justo González:** Well, let me begin by correcting the last thing because Christianity is becoming less and less a white man's religion. According to demographic statistics, the typical Christian now is an African woman in Central Africa someplace. Uh, the center of Christianity has moved south drastically. And that's true both of Christianity at large, and it's true of Protestant Christianity. So that, that has, uh, has changed. I think that part of the problem is that we have allowed ourselves to understand Christianity by a very narrow history that we have been told that we have followed. A history mostly of recent times.

One of the things that we very often forget is that in the New Testament, a Christian's identity is first and foremost that [00:41:00] of being a Christian. And that means that you're always an alien, no matter where you are. There's a famous writing from the, probably the second century, where the writer says that, "Christians are at home in every land, and in every land, they are an alien."

And I'm thinking for, for this situation today, for us, talking about immigrants and citizenship and all that, Paul had the most coveted citizenship of his time. And what does he say? Our citizenship is elsewhere. So because he's a citizen of that other order, he is willing to share with people who are not citizens of the civil order in which he has a privilege.

And it seems to me that that's part of what it means to be a Christian today in this nation. Is your citizenship in this land? [00:42:00] Is that your final citizenship?

**Rasool Berry:** So, so there's something that Paul is teaching us, even though he was a Roman citizen and at different points in the book of Acts, right, exercises that citizenship as a way of protecting him from flogging, that type of thing in Acts 22, but you're saying that his ultimate posture is one of relinquishing that power. So in that case, is there something to the fact that like he introduces himself as a bond servant, a slave in his letters, as opposed to a citizen?

**Dr. Justo González:** I'm not sure that relinquishing is not too strong because he doesn't just relinquish the power, he uses the power. So I'm not saying, you know, if you have a coveted citizenship, don't use it. I'm saying it's your obligation as a Christian to use it for the other citizenship.

**Rasool Berry:** Yeah. That's even, that's even stronger. Because that's that aspect of God then essentially redeeming and subversively undermining the power [00:43:00] of society in order to bring about the power of his kingdom.

**Dr. Justo González:** Yeah. And I think it's also important because one of the things that very much bothers me when I talk to mostly white Christians in this country who are very conscious social issues and really want to do something about it, is a sort of a, a, an overpowering sense of guilt. How can we get rid of who we are, of being who we are? And that's not the way to go. The way to go is how can we use who we are for what we all ought to be?

**Rasool Berry:** Hmm. Yeah. And I want to get back into your story because we kind of left you in Puerto Rico, but you finished up at Yale. And you mentioned that at one point the plan was to be a pastor, but then it kind of shifted on you and you became more of a professor.

But then you changed from being a professor to then like being more of a speaker/mobilizer. So what happened in the professorship that caused you to realize that your greatest impact might [00:44:00] be not just in the classroom?

**Dr. Justo González:** I think part of what happened was the change of teaching in Latin America where there were few people who could do what I was doing. And, uh, coming to teach in this country where there are a million people who could do what you were doing. And then you begin to say, well now, is there something that I can do that's different than this? : Something that nobody else is going to do, that has to be done.

**Rasool Berry** But there was something that you saw that you were looking at, like maybe there's this thing that I am uniquely qualified in this context to do. What is that thing that you saw that was important for you to commit yourself to?

**Dr. Justo González:** Well, I think it was helping the Latino church find ways to rediscover the Gospel, to find new ways to live the Gospel, and to impact society around it. And that means basically training leaders. And now, the vast majority of [00:45:00] Hispanic pastors never show up at a seminary.

They have been self-formed, or formed by tutors, or formed by Bible institutes that are very often not recognized by anybody else. And part of what we have to do is how do we get these people to be heard, these things to be organized, to be joined, because they have something to contribute to the whole church.

So it's not just a question of the Hispanic church, it's a question of the whole church. And you see, it's also, talking about these countries, it's partially a question of the future of this country. If it's true that the Latino community is growing, a great deal of the future of the country will be determined by what Latino people think about the goal of the country and the life and so on.

And you go to our Latino barrios, and the only permanent institution that's there is bars and churches and schools. The schools are places of violence. Uh, the bars, well, you know about them. And [00:46:00] it's only the churches that go there, and there are lots of do gooders that come in to start a program, and bring some federal money, and do this, and do a study, and so on, and then they go home.

But the thing that's always there is the church. And it's the church, you know, the same happens with African American communities, the church that produces the leaders. You look at the people who are now running for various offices, no matter what party, and most of them have been shaped by leadership in the church.

And what that church becomes will determine what these people become, and that will determine to a great degree what this country becomes.

**Rasool Berry:** Wow. Yeah, that's definitely an important legacy. You know, and in that context, one of the things that I'm also interested in is in *Mañana Christian Theology for a Hispanic Perspective*, you write about the connection of the yearning for going back to your own land. And I'll just quote you so that you can go from there. You said,

*“This is who we are a people in exile [00:47:00] by the waters of Babylon. We shall live and die by the waters of Babylon. We shall sing the songs of Zion. Our Zion is not the lands where we were born, though we still love them. For those lands are lost to us forever. And in any case, since we have lived for a long time beyond innocence, we can never equate those lands with Zion.”*

Tell me about how that yearning of the exile for homeland, and yet the realization that that may be creates in us something different, relates to the Hispanic experience and, and it's something that's instructive for all of us.

**Dr. Justo González:** Well, it's not just me. I was reading the words of Calvin yearning for France after he had been in exile forever. And he hated what was going on in France. He, he disliked what happened, what France had become. But still he yearned for France. Now, obviously he yearned for a France that no longer existed.[00:48:00]

And I think that's part of the experience of exile. You yearn for a land that no longer exists. So you cannot just say, "I'm gonna take a boat and go home," you know. Uh, home is no longer there. But yet you learn from some of the experiences you had from those lands. And in many ways, the way you understand your future hope, the way you understand the kingdom of God, it's connected with that yearning. A yearning of fellowship, of easy understanding among others, of experiences that are fruitful and, and, and, and edifying and all that.

That's part of what we yearn. Very, very concretely, let me just give you this one example, you know. When I was growing up, people would drop in at any time. There were always people coming around, talking, you, everybody. As a matter of fact, in many towns, people had, in the door they had a hook and eye.

So if the door was not closed, the door was in a hook.[00:49:00] And if the door is in the hook, it means that any neighbor can just come and knock it up and walk around and say, hello, so and so, how are you? If you don't want people to come in because you're busy or something, you close the door. But if the door is in the hook, that means you're welcome. It's something similar to where you put balloons out there for an open house here today, but the balloons are always up. Generally the balloons are up, okay? And somehow I yearn for that.

**Rasool Berry:** Well, I can't wrap us up without asking about the other Dr. González that lives at your place. Tell me about, you know, meeting your wife and how she as an academic in her own right has, you know, even contributed to your understandings.

**Dr. Justo González:** Oh, enormously, enormously. We met at an ecumenical meeting of the National Council of Churches. It was the Commission on Faith and Order of the National Council of Churches. She was representing the Presbyterian Church, I was representing another Methodist Church. [00:50:00] She already was teaching church history at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary.

I was teaching here at Candler. And her name before we were married was Gonzales. She spelled it differently because I have been in this country for generations. They had been in New York when New York was still New Holland. And so they spelled it different, but it was the same name. And we have very similar interests. We talked immediately about. . .

**Rasool Berry:** When was this? What year did y'all meet?

**Dr. Justo González:** That was in '73.

**Rasool Berry:** Okay, gotcha. And the way you kick game was to talk about early church fathers. That was your approach?

**Dr. Justo González:** And the significance of [name] for liberation theology. That was a conversation. Ever since, I mean, we have done all kinds of things together. We would very often preach together. We lectured together. I mean, sort of give and take. We have written together. Everything I write, she checks. Actually most of what I write, she tells me what to say first. So, she teases me. She says that [00:51:00] I don't have blood, I have printer's ink. And that I have never had an unpublished thought, which is true, but I also answered, I have had many an unthought published. So we have fun. We have fun.

**Rasool Berry:** What's been one thing in particular that she has helped you understand deeper about, you know, your faith and your scholarship?

**Dr. Justo González:** Well, obviously, clearly the issues of women. I mean, in the whole Presbyterian Church, in any of the traditional academic fields, she and another colleague were the first two, she at Louisville and the other woman at Princeton, in any of the Presbyterian seminaries.

When she was here at Columbia, she was the only one for 10 years. Columbia Seminary. So that was very similar to my experience. I mean, when I was at Candler, I was 10 year, but even in 10 year track, there was no Latino in any ATS accredited seminary. Peltas Seminary, in the whole country, [00:52:00] just one. And so there are many, many connections and then, and then seeing putting those together.

And that also became a strategic in many ways, because when we were, we don't do that so much now, when we were doing a whole lot of speaking during the early years of our marriage, it was the time of dealing with the Equal Rights Amendment and all that kind of things, and so she would get invited very often to speak to a group of women or people in the white church who wanted to talk about women's issues.

And she would say, okay, but I'll come with my husband, we'll both speak. And we were going to speak about, about women's issues and also about race and culture issues. And that wasn't what they wanted, but that's what they got. And then as things began changing, and you began, everybody was talking now about Latinos issues, then we still say, well, okay.

We come and talk about Latino issues, but we also talk about gender issues. And that's not always what they want, but that's what they get. [00:53:00] So in many ways, I think that's happening all the time, yeah.

**Rasool Berry:** You mentioned earlier that you, one of the things you really wanted was to be able to equip Hispanic teachers and whatnot. So tell me about how AETH, the Association for Hispanic Theological Education, came about and why you decided to be a part of founding it.

**Dr. Justo González:** Well, uh, the reason why it came about is simply that there was a, a very large disconnection between, uh, the various groups or among the various groups, uh, that I somehow stakeholders in the training of Latino, uh, leaders for the church.

Very few go to seminary. This is improving now, but still the percentage of Latina, Latino students in ATS accredited seminaries is a little bit over 4% of the population. Same thing with the faculty. And, uh, obviously that's way, way below the proportion of the Latino population [00:54:00] within the country. And, uh, if you count that among the various groups, Latinos are the ones that are most church going.

That makes it even worse. Which means that most Latino, uh, Latino leaders are formed in different ways. They either just begin at church, and then somehow they're meeting in the living room, and that eventually becomes a church, and they become a pastor. Or they go to Bible Institute, and they're certified by somebody that nobody else accepts. Uh, nobody else, uh, accredits, but they are now a pastor, and then they go and start a church.

Uh, some years ago there were over a thousand Protestant Hispanic churches in L.A. County alone. At that point, that's years and years ago, now it's probably more like 3, 000 or so. But at that point, in the whole western region of the Association of Theological Schools, all seminaries, Catholic and Protestant and everything, and that western region is almost half of the country.

There [00:55:00] were a couple of hundred Latino students, okay? So, who's producing these people, and how do we help that to develop? At the same time, people go to seminary, and when they come out, they are very much qualified to work in an Anglo church. But they have been pulled out of their own community, they have pulled out of their own experience, they have been disconnected, and they find it very difficult now to go and talk the religious language that the people talk.

So, how do we bring those together? And part of what AETH is doing constantly is bringing all those together. One of the most significant things that's happened is that now ATS, that's the Association of Theological Schools, which is the accrediting agency for theological seminaries in the U. S. and Canada, they have agreed with AETH, the Association for Hispanic Theological Education, that if AETH certifies that a certain Bible Institute program meets certain requirements, people from there can go [00:56:00] directly into seminary without going to college. Because that's one of the great limits on getting more population into seminaries.

They have a part of the other thing that AETH has done. Let me tell you, in Spanish there are lots of very, very good theological books. So good that nobody can read them. They're highfalutin, you know, all these scholars and so on. Big thick books, but they're not reachable by the people, even by the pastors themselves.

And there are lots of very popular easy books to read that nobody should read. Now, how do you get the people who can write those good, complicated books to write so that this is available to the people? And part of what AETH has been doing is that. They have a whole series of Bible commentaries written by people who are professors, scholars on the Bible, but written [00:57:00] at the level of the church and for the church and dealing with the issues of the church.

That's something else that they do. They have created now a network of Bible institutes and theological institutions, so they have an association of various kinds of institutions teaching. And they're all working together. So they're doing all kinds of things.

**Rasool Berry:** Yeah. No, that is so much. We started this conversation, and you shared about how, you know, your mother was an educator and a principal at a school, and your father also was an educator, but also had this vision of making agricultural knowledge transferable to the masses, those who didn't have access. Do you see the connection? Like, do you see a symmetry between what they were doing and now what you've committed so much of your life to both educating and trying to distribute this to the masses?

**Dr. Justo González:** Let me tell you, one of the greatest lessons that my father gave me, [00:58:00] I must have been about third grade or something like that, and I had just done some kind of an essay or something, and the teacher gave me a hundred.

I came back very proud, and I gave it to my father. And, you know, he was a writer, a novelist, and so on. He looked at it, and I read it, and said, "What were you trying to say?" And I told him, and then he said, "Why didn't you say it?"

In other words, I realized at that point that I was being taught to write in order to impress people. And he was teaching me, you write in order to tell people. And to me, I think that was in many ways very formative because right now when I write, I always have 10 or 12 people in front of me. They have names, they don't know it, but they have names, and I know them. And I'm telling so and so, I'm telling this.

**Rasool Berry:** That's so good. I'm grateful that you love to write and that we have [00:59:00] had the benefit of with so many of your books, too many to name that have really reached and helped so many people around the world. I'll leave with this last question. You write in *The Story Luke Tells: Luke's Unique Witness to the Gospel*, you write, “*If this were simply a story about the past, it would be appropriate to write at the conclusion of Acts 28 as at the conclusion of a film: The End. But since the story is unfinished, it is more appropriate to conclude it with RSVP, like an invitation that awaits a response.*”

I'm curious about how you see the story as a historian and as someone that is in the present. How you see the story continue to be written of the church and what is the part that we get to play in that?

**Dr. Justo González:** To me, the main reason why I study history is not just curiosity and fun and it's both, that's also true. But it's also because history is the only [01:00:00] way that we have to understand or try to discern anything about the future. When an economist warns us about a possible recession, they don't have a crystal ball. All that they have is a bunch of history of previous recessions, or what happened at the time, or what they think caused them, and so on, and how that is similar or is not similar to what's happening today.

When somebody tells me that the sun is going to rise tomorrow, I, there's no, guarantee for that, except that's happened for generations and generations. The only way that we have in order to live into the future wisely is to know the past. And the better we know the past, the more prepared we are for the unexpected eventualities of the future. And when those unexpected eventualities come up, the only responses we'll have will be what we have learned from the past.[01:01:00]

**Rasool Berry:** This is *Where You're From?*. I'm Rasool Berry, and remember, it's not just about where you're at, it's also about where you're from. This show was produced by Ryan Clevenger, Mary Jo Clark, and Jade Gussman, and was engineered by Kevin Burgess. I also want to thank Seamus and Jenny for their help in supporting and promoting *Where You're From?*.

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