



*Research Articles*

---

# **Historic and Contemporary Influences on Reading the Bible with the Poor: Liberation Theology and Poor People's Movements**

**Jessica C. Williams and Susan M. Yelich Biniiecki**

Kansas State University

---

## INTRODUCTION

On a day when many in the nation were collectively mourning and crying out for justice after the death of George Floyd, the Freedom Church of the Poor gathered again for weekly online worship and proclaimed the Poor People's Beatitudes and Poor People's Pentecost (Kairos Center, 2020b). These biblical readings are reinterpretations of well-known passages in the New Testament. Through these reinterpretations, the Freedom Church declared, in a collective lament and commitment to justice, "God is with all those whose Divine breath, life-breath is being violently taken from them for we will no longer be suffocated by Empire, which is steeped in racism" (Kairos Center, 2020b, n.p.). Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. conceived of "the freedom church of the poor" in late 1967 when he called for the poor and dispossessed to join together in a multi-racial "non-violent army of the poor" to organize the Poor People's Campaign (Baptist & Damico, 2005; King, 1968; Wessel-McCoy, 2017). The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival (PPC:NCMR), a movement to end poverty led by the poor and dispossessed, reignited King's campaign in 2017 (About, n.d.). The Freedom Church of the Poor and many of the leaders and organizers within the PPC:NCMR are developing and utilizing a biblical interpretation method known as Reading the Bible with the Poor. This article explores the theory of revolutionary critical pedagogy in relationship to the Reading the Bible with the Poor methodology, as well as the influences of liberation theology and other poor people's movements, through an understanding of the poor as epistemological change agents and the methodology as a tool to challenge dominant, hegemonic narratives about poverty and the poor.

Reading the Bible with the Poor is a liberative hermeneutic of biblical interpretation embedded within the movement to end poverty led by the poor in the United States, organized through the PPC:NCMR (Theoharis, 2014, 2015, 2017, n.d.). Leaders within the movement study, analyze, interpret, and apply the methodology and biblical texts for purposes of political education,

*This article explores the theory of revolutionary critical pedagogy in relationship to the Reading the Bible with the Poor methodology, as well as the influences of liberation theology and other poor people's movements, through an understanding of the poor as epistemological change agents and the methodology as a tool to challenge dominant, hegemonic narratives about poverty and the poor.*

leadership development, direct action, and to shift and shape the narrative about poverty and the poor (Baptist & Theoharis, 2015; Barnes, 2020; Hall, 2019; Theoharis, et. al, 2019). This shift includes changing perceptions of the dehumanized poor to that of organized, moral change agents and leaders within the movement, church, and society. The Reading the

Bible with the Poor methodology is influenced by local and global liberation theology and social movements, including the anti-slavery movement, the Social Gospel Movement, the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, and the 1968 Poor People's Campaign (Hall, 2019; Theoharis, 2014, 2017, n.d.). These movements embody concepts of revolutionary critical pedagogy, which have influenced the development and implementation of the Reading the Bible with the Poor methodology.

## REVOLUTIONARY CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Critical pedagogy encompasses diverse and evolving perspectives, including radical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, revolutionary critical pedagogy, and radical learning (Alfred, 2016; Holst, 2003, 2006; Horton & Freire, 1990; McLaren, 1998, 2010, 2017; Zacharakis-Jutz, 1988). Among critiques of critical pedagogy is the claim of “the domestication of critical pedagogy” (McLaren, 1998, p. 449), and the call to return to its revolutionary roots particularly in the age of neoliberal capitalism. Neoliberalism is understood as “a political project carried out by the corporate capitalist class” (Skærlund Risager, 2016, n.p.) and is characterized by such practices as free-market capitalism, privatization, and deregulation.

The conversation about the revolutionary nature of critical pedagogy, especially in response to neoliberal capitalism, has continued to develop since the late 1990s. Allman (2010) defined revolutionary critical education as “preparing people to engage in revolutionary social transformation...that is also, in and of itself, a form of revolutionary social transformation” (p. 2). Situated within the field of critical pedagogy, yet embedded within the development of neoliberal capitalism, revolutionary critical pedagogy utilizes Marxist theory of labor and political economy, and emphasizes social class and class struggle as the basis from which social analysis and social transformation must proceed (Allman, 2010; Holst, 2003; McLaren, 2010, 2017; Moraes, 2003). Revolutionary critical pedagogy is a social critique which stresses revolutionary transformation and praxis (Allman, 2010; Holst, 2003; McLaren, 1998). Allman (2010) identifies multiple barriers that must be overcome by revolutionary critical pedagogy to critique the “dominant

ideological capitalist hegemony,” (p. 220) including an understanding of social class and a focus on the unity of the social class, not identity differences. Therefore, critical pedagogy is revolutionary when it seeks to engage in learning that leads to action toward social change which challenges neoliberal capitalism and other oppressive practices and seeks to reconstruct society from the bottom up, instead of the top down. Holst (2003) encouraged revolutionary critical pedagogues to look beyond academic circles for examples of the embodiment of revolutionary critical pedagogy and toward the “whole world of revolutionary organizations engaged in truly dynamic and innovative revolutionary praxis that is below the radar screen of the fields of transformative and critical education” (p. 346). In other words, revolutionary critical pedagogy, too, must seek to be transformed from the bottom up. Holst’s (2003) challenge is a call for the transformation of critical pedagogy, to shift the power and epistemology of revolutionary critical education from formal academic educators to the poor and oppressed organizing and educating for liberation. Reading the Bible with the Poor provides an example of such a practice.

*Therefore, critical pedagogy is revolutionary when it seeks to engage in learning that leads to action toward social change which challenges neoliberal capitalism and other oppressive practices and seeks to reconstruct society from the bottom up, instead of the top down.*

## UNDERSTANDING READING THE BIBLE WITH THE POOR

On the first day of 40 days of action of the revived Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival in 2018, Callie, one of the leaders of the campaign, who self-identifies as one of the 140 million poor and dispossessed (Sarkar, Gupta Barnes, & Noffke, n.d.), stood on the platform at the opening rally in Washington DC and referenced the biblical character in Jeremiah 31:15, Rachel, who wails and weeps for her children because they are no more (Kell, 2020). Callie, a leader within the Alabama campaign branch, explained she had buried two of her children as young adults, a son from gun violence and a daughter who did not have access to life-saving health care. Callie then let out a wail. She cried and wailed and mourned because “her children were no more!” (Kell, 2020). She wailed because she had lost her children due to a system that, she says, was never designed to work for the millions of poor and dispossessed (Kell, 2020). Callie’s wails continue to echo in the ears of those organizing for justice and exemplify the methodology of Reading the Bible with the Poor through the main tenets and assumptions outlined next.

Three tenets of the Reading the Bible with the Poor methodology (see Figure 1) include: a practice of liberative exegesis of the scriptures, the connection of personal piety to social action, and actions rooted in a social movement to end poverty led by the poor.

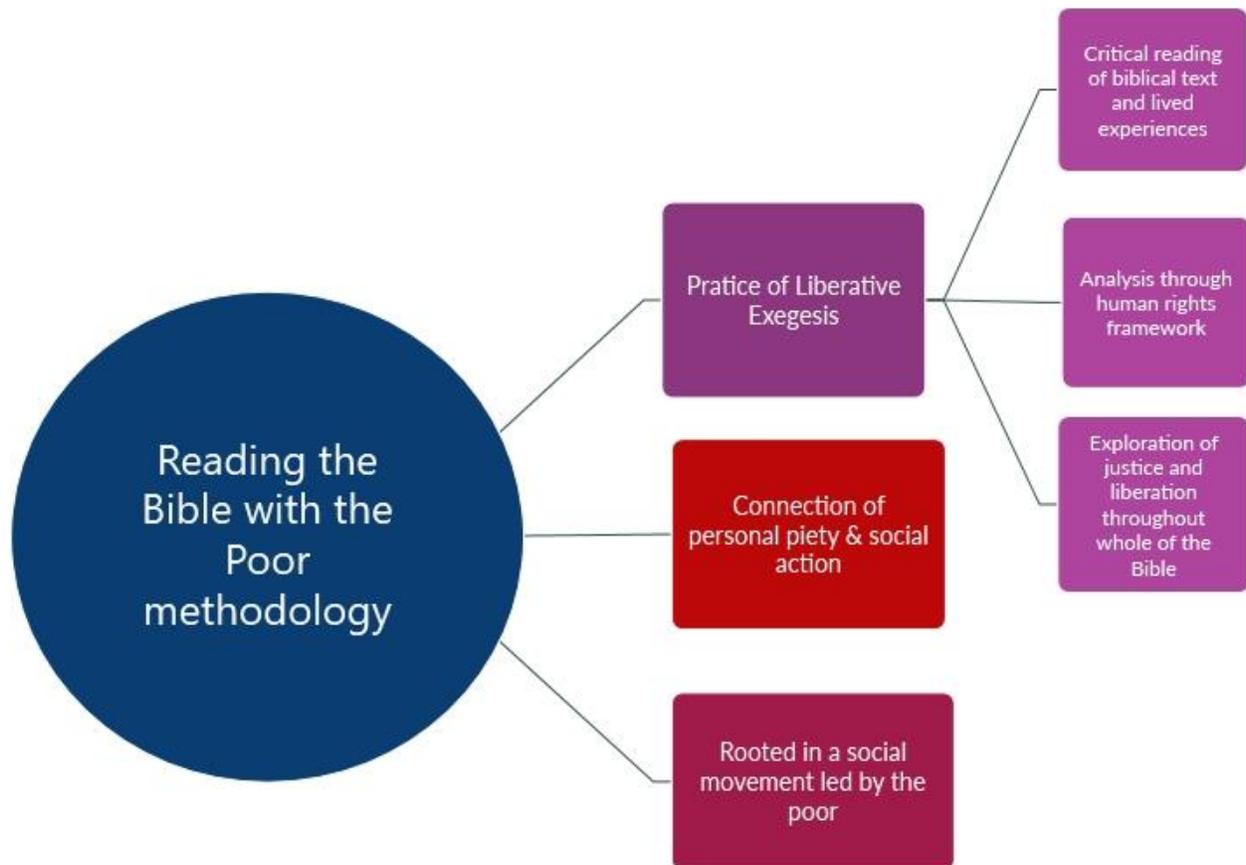
The first key tenet, the methodology as liberative exegesis, operates within three main assumptions. First, liberative exegesis includes engaging a critical reading of the biblical text by studying the textual and historical context of the passage, as well as inter-textual study of how scriptural passages relate to one another, especially regarding poverty and economic systems (Hall, 2019; Theoharis, 2017). Alongside this critical reading of the Bible, practitioners engage in critical

dialogue and analysis of their current lived experiences and economic systems that create poverty and dispossession. The second assumption of this liberative exegesis is that the context of both the biblical text and lived experiences are analyzed through a human rights framework and critique of charity (Theoharis, 2014). Understanding the role of charity in alleviating, but not ending and, therefore, maintaining poverty is a central aspect of dissecting a distorted narrative of the poor’s lack of agency and inevitable poverty on earth (Theoharis & Wessel-McCoy, n.d.). Reading the Bible with the Poor recognizes the critique of charity throughout the Bible and exposes structures of charity that exist to maintain the power of the ruling class (Chadwick & Hribar, 2007; Theoharis,

*The Bible is read through the lens of poverty and the agency of the poor, recognizing the various layers of narratives in the Bible related to power and oppression.*

2015). Instead, a human rights framework, deeply embedded within spiritual and biblical values, is recognized as a sacred

declaration that “everybody has a right to live”. Further, liberative exegesis is applied to the whole of the Bible, not only individual verses, undergirded by an understanding of the entire Bible as a people’s history of struggle against empire and oppression. The Bible is read through the lens of poverty and the agency of the poor, recognizing the various layers of narratives in the Bible related to power and oppression. In so doing, practitioners avoid proof-texting individual verses and instead explore the larger biblical themes of justice and liberation (Theoharis, 2015).



**Figure 1**  
*Key Tenets of Reading the Bible with the Poor Methodology*

The second main tenet of the Reading the Bible with the Poor methodology holds sacred the relationship between personal piety and social action (Alston, 2009). The leaders who interpret and apply biblical passages through the lens of the Reading the Bible with the Poor live out faithful expressions of their beliefs through both personal and collective spiritual practices and communal social action, as is found throughout the Scriptures. Many leaders within the movement find strength through the sustaining practices of corporate and private prayer and worship, as well as through liberative biblical interpretations and the social actions that result, witnessed especially through the weekly gatherings of the Freedom Church of the Poor (Barnes, 2020).

Thirdly, the Reading the Bible with the Poor methodology and the Freedom Church of the Poor are embedded in the movement to end poverty in the U.S. This movement traces its history from the lineage of social movements led by the poor and posits that social change must be led by those most impacted by injustice (Baptist & Jones, n.d; Baptist & Rehmann, 2011; Baptist & Theoharis, 2015). Practitioners of the Reading the Bible with the Poor methodology utilize it as a tool to unite the poor across lines of division and understand the Bible as a blueprint for doing so (Hall, 2019), especially through the understanding of Jesus as a poor man who led a revolutionary social movement (Theoharis et al., 2019). The methodology asserts that God is on the side of the oppressed, poverty can and must be ended, and the poor, united as a social force across difference, must lead that change (Hall, 2019). To shape and shift the narrative of poverty and the poor is the work of the movement: a praxis and a product of Reading the Bible with the Poor. As praxis, the iterative practice of action and reflection, Reading the Bible with the Poor is a tool for movement organizing which also produces biblical interpretations that shift the narrative about poverty and the poor. Therefore, Reading the Bible with the Poor is critical revolutionary praxis which builds a critique of the dominant ideology with a focus on bottom-up social class transformation (Allman, 2010; Holst, 2003).

## INFLUENTIAL EMBODIMENTS OF REVOLUTIONARY CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

The practitioners of the Reading the Bible with the Poor methodology and the congregation of the Freedom Church of the Poor understand their work as part of a long lineage of social movements rooted in biblical values of love and justice led by the oppressed as a united social force. However, the history of these social movements is often lost, hidden, or discarded because it challenges dominant, hegemonic narratives and structures. Therefore, part of the praxis of the Reading the Bible with the Poor methodology includes uncovering and learning from efforts of liberative biblical interpretations in which those most impacted by injustice are the epistemological change agents for uniting the poor and dispossessed as a social force for transformation. Unearthing these lost narratives and mining them for lessons contributes to the

*...part of the praxis of the Reading the Bible with the Poor methodology includes uncovering and learning from efforts of liberative biblical interpretations in which those most impacted by injustice are the epistemological change agents for uniting the poor and dispossessed as a social force for transformation.*

shaping and shifting of a narrative about the poor and oppressed. The section below, of brief introductions to the movements that have influenced the Reading the Bible with

the Poor methodology, does not do justice to fully describing their role in social transformation and liberation. What follows, instead, is an attempt to make explicit the contributions from these movements toward revolutionary critical pedagogy that has influenced the Reading the Bible with the Poor methodology through a critique of the dominant narrative embodied within the united leadership of the oppressed.

## Anti-slavery Movement

The anti-slavery movement in the United States is an example of a social change movement led by those most impacted by the injustice they were experiencing (Baptist & Damico, 2005) and backed by abolitionists united in the cause for freedom. Movement leaders like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglas, and many others organized efforts to free slaves. Additionally, this was a movement of the poor and oppressed as a united social force across racial and class divisions. The role of religion and the power of the biblical text was key in both the formation and maintenance of the dominant, hegemonic narrative of slavery as justified by the use of Scripture (Wessel-McCoy, 2017) and, also, in the anti-slavery movement. Liberative readings of Scriptures by slaves and those united in their cause for freedom inspired revolts and rebellion. Three religious leaders who were former slaves - Gabriel Prosser, Nathaniel Turner, and Denmark Vesey - led the largest slave revolts in U.S. history, while John Brown, a poor white abolitionist, also organized a revolt of free whites and free blacks driven by his religious beliefs (Wessel-McCoy, 2017). Leaders in the anti-slavery movement followed the Bible as a source of spiritual and theological strength that identified “God as Liberator” (Cone, 1975/2001). Deconstructing the hegemonic narrative of oppression and utilizing the Bible as a spiritual and moral guidebook for liberation and freedom, was foundational for subsequent social movements and praxis, including the Reading the Bible with the Poor (Theoharis, n.d.) and the social gospel movement.

*Liberative readings of Scriptures by slaves and those united in their cause for freedom inspired revolts and rebellion.*

## Social Gospel Movement

Walter Rauschenbush became pastor of Second German Baptist Church in the Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood of New York City in 1886, a time of immense poverty. It was from ministering within these conditions of poverty and oppression that Rauschenbush’s contributions as a key theologian within the Social Gospel Movement emerged. He critiqued the capitalist system and advocated for societal reform to Christian Socialism, through the intertwining of personal piety and social concern. In writing about social transformation and personal piety Rauschenbush stated, “Go at both simultaneously; neither is possible without the other” (Rauschenbush, 1890, as cited in Patterson, 1972). By expressing the interdependency of individual and social salvation, he became known as the first “liberal evangelical” and influenced many later liberationist theologians and pastors, including Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (George & Dockery, 1990, p. 378). King and others also were influenced by the Black Social Gospel tradition, which grew out of the anti-slavery movement, and included a critique of the capitalist system which produced economic inequality and oppression. Leaders within this tradition, though, also incorporated an analysis of

white supremacy as a hegemonic force inseparable from economic exploitation (Wessel-McCoy, 2017). Leading theologians and pastors within this tradition included Benjamin E. Mays, Mordecai Johnson, and Howard Thurman (Dorrien, 2018; Wessel-McCoy, 2017). Thurman's first and most influential book, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), became popular during the civil rights movement (Dorrien, 2018). In this book, Thurman discussed Jesus' identity as a poor man ministering among masses of poor people (Thurman, 1949/1996). The social gospel traditions influenced subsequent social movements, such as the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the Reading the Bible with the Poor methodology.

## Southern Tenant Farmers' Union

The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU) is one of the lesser-known social movements in U.S. history, but one of the most important in how it united poor white and poor black sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Established in 1934 in Arkansas, this movement "aimed to secure economic and social justice for landless farmers" (Gellman & Roll, 2011). The union supported tenant farming families who had been evicted from their land (Wessel-McCoy, 2017), as well as agricultural workers who faced other issues due to an economic system meant to perpetuate "the disunity of the poor and dispossessed to maintain social control," a practice historically utilized by

*King and others also were influenced by the Black Social Gospel tradition, which grew out of the anti-slavery movement, and included a critique of the capitalist system which produced economic inequality and oppression.*

the ruling class (Kairos Center, 2020a, n.p.). STFU was embedded within spiritual and religious traditions from which the calling for social change and personal faith and piety were intertwined. Churches were organizing spaces and faith leaders who were also poor, became

leaders within the movement (Gellman & Roll, 2011). Owen Whitfield, a black preacher and the son of sharecroppers, and Claude Williams, a white preacher who also had known poverty and hunger, organized their communities and congregations alongside the STFU and saw their communities, their calling, and their liberation bound up with one another in building this movement for social transformation as "brothers in the fight for freedom" (Gellman & Roll, 2011, p. 2). Biographers Gellman and Roll (2011) asserted that "although both were believers and preachers first and union activists second, the pair came to understand that labor organizations often had more to offer as vehicles for God's justice than the denominational Christian church" (p. 3). These two preachers are examples of what the STFU movement built, which became part of the legacy of the labor movement and Highlander Folk School (Gellman & Roll, 2011), the civil rights movement and the Poor People's Campaign (Wessel-McCoy, 2017), and the Reading the Bible with the Poor: a multi-racial organization of the organized poor through a liberative understanding of faith and biblical interpretation.

## Poor People's Campaign of 1968

In 1967, Dr. King and others began organizing the Poor People's Campaign, building on the work of the civil rights movement and toward expanded analysis, praxis, and organizing to combat the

triplet evils of poverty, racism, and militarism (Wessel-McCoy, 2017). The organizing for the Poor People’s Campaign emerged with a three-part plan, including (a) a multiracial encampment of the poor, called Resurrection City, to take place on the National Mall, (b) mass protests and arrests within Washington DC to highlight issues of economic and racial injustice, and (c) a national boycott of the nation’s most powerful corporations (Chase, 1998). The campaign included an explicit critique of charity which King proclaimed saying “true compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar...an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring” (King, 1968, as cited in Theoharis & Wessel-McCoy, n.d.). King’s vision for this multi-racial nonviolent army of the poor was influenced, in part, by the theologians of the black social gospel movement and liberation theologies emerging in other parts of the world who influenced his understanding of justice and freedom rooted in biblical values. As such, King’s call for social transformation was intricately intertwined with his understandings of faith and piety.

Resurrection City participants traveled in caravans from the East coast, Appalachia, the South, the Midwest, the Southwest, and the West, led by Black, Indigenous, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and poor White leaders and participants, including The Mule Train from Marks, Mississippi (Chase, 1998). Mule Train travelers wrote phrases on their wagons, including “Don’t Laugh Folks, Jesus Was a Poor Man” and “Everybody’s Got a Right to Work, Eat, Live” (Hamilton, 2016; Wessel-McCoy, 2017). Hamilton (2016) refers to these actions as examples of learning from the movement and pedagogy of presence. These profoundly simple slogans interpreted both Scripture and the participants’ lived experiences and put them in solidarity with one another, positioning Jesus and the poor on the caravan as epistemological change agents through the organized poor building a movement for liberation.

## Liberation Theology

Also, in the late 1960s, liberation and revolution were brewing in Latin American countries where many of the Catholic priests who served within impoverished and oppressed communities began to interpret the scriptures in revolutionary ways. One primary liberation theologian of this context was Gustavo Gutiérrez who proclaimed God’s “preferential option for the poor” (1971/1988, p. xxvi). The spread of liberation theology became a dangerous enterprise for priests and laity alike as many were defrocked or assassinated for proclaiming biblical interpretations that stood on the side of the oppressed and not the ruling class (Gutiérrez, 1971/1988). In the introduction to the second edition of his seminal book, Gutiérrez (1971/1988) wrote about that time when Christians in Latin America experienced “a tense and intense period of *solidarity, reflection, and martyrdom*” (p. xx, italics in original). The liberation theology movement in Latin America has influenced countless movements and theologies since, including liberation theology in the U.S. (Cone, 1975/2001), base communities in Latin America, and Paulo Freire and the development of his educational theory of critical pedagogy.

*The spread of liberation theology became a dangerous enterprise for priests and laity alike as many were defrocked or assassinated for proclaiming biblical interpretations that stood on the side of the oppressed and not the ruling class.*

## Freire and Critical Pedagogy

Paulo Freire, often known as the cornerstone of critical pedagogy (Leopando, 2017), is credited with influencing the praxis of adult educators of various fields. Biblical scholars, for example, have utilized Freire's model of banking education versus problem-posing dialogue in engaging adult learners of the Bible in democratic biblical dialogue (Schüssler Fiorenza, 2009), including as part of the Reading the Bible with the Poor praxis (Hall, 2019). Freire was practicing and writing his educational theory in Latin America parallel to the work of liberationist theologians and both were influenced by one another (Leopando, 2017). Though the history of this mutual influence is often hidden, understanding Freire's religious and biblical influences is as important as understanding the sociopolitical and economic circumstances that shaped his work (Holst, 2006; Leopando, 2017). Freire was a practicing Catholic and activist who understood God as liberator and conscientization as a process of conversion (Leopando, 2017). The Reading the Bible with the Poor methodology utilizes Freire's educational model and praxis (Baptist & Rehmann, 2011) and is influenced by his theology, as are other social movements that are also embedded within liberation theology.

## Base Communities and Popular/Contextual Readings of the Bible

Base communities of "ordinary readers" (Hall, 2019; Ueti, n.d.; West, 1999) who read and interpreted scripture through their own lived experiences were central to the development of liberative scriptural interpretations. For example, in Solentiname, Nicaragua, Father Ernesto Cardenal did not preach a homily during mass, but facilitated a dialogue with the "many theologians" of the villages where he ministered before and during the Nicaraguan Revolution (Cardenal, 1977, p. vii). These interpretations were published as a commentary on the Gospels and are utilized within the study and development of Reading the Bible with the Poor. Similarly, Bob Ekblad (2005) has facilitated and documented bible studies with the marginalized on the U.S. border, in prisons, and in other impoverished situations. Popular or Contextual Bible Reading emerged in other parts of Latin America and Africa, as well, including in Brazil as part of the social movement organizing of the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST) (Kairos Staff, n.d.; Ueti, n.d.). Members of this movement engage these studies "not to learn about the bible but to learn about transforming society...we understand that even the bible is a political site of struggle" (Kairos Staff, n.d., n.p.). Freire influenced the implementation of this pedagogy in that all participants are both teachers and learners (Ueti, n.d.). A similar form of biblical study emerged in South Africa's struggle for liberation from apartheid in which "socially engaged biblical scholars" read the Bible alongside "ordinary readers" toward interpretations that led to social action (West, 1999). The Shackdwellers Movement in South Africa also engages with facilitators of this Contextual Bible Study Method (Theoharis, n.d.).

## DISCUSSION

**H**aving reviewed the historic and contemporary influences upon the development and utilization of the Reading the Bible with the Poor, it is instructive to consider two key

concepts: the leadership of the poor as epistemological change agents and the methodology's role of shifting the narrative about poverty and the poor.

### The Last Shall Be First: An Epistemological Transformation

God's "preferential option for the poor," situated in liberation theology is represented in each of the movements that influences the Reading the Bible with the Poor through an understanding of the poor and dispossessed as "moral, political, and epistemological change agents" (Theoharis, n.d., n.p.). The movement to end poverty refers to the leadership of the poor as "a social and political force united and organized" to build a broad movement of emancipation (Baptist & Jones, n.d.). The movement understands the poor and dispossessed as powerful interpreters, proclaimers, and creators of the good news of liberation found in Scripture, as well as analyzers, educators, and organizers for the movement to end poverty. As such, the poor and dispossessed are knowledge producers for societal transformation (Caruso, 2019).

Examples of the poor and dispossessed as epistemological change agents for social transformation are found throughout the historical and contemporary influences of the Reading the Bible with the Poor methodology discussed above. The abolitionist and anti-slavery movements proclaimed a biblical interpretation of liberation that challenged the ruling class structure of slavery. Preachers of the Social Gospel Movement and liberation theologians read and proclaimed the Scriptures as liberative for the poor and condemning of systems that oppress. Latin American base communities organized local readings of Scripture that were liberative and engaged in revolutionary action. Leaders of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the Poor People's Campaign organized multi-racial movements of the poor and oppressed based on biblical and theological understandings of freedom and justice. As one biblical scholar and practitioner of Contextual Bible Study notes, it makes a difference with whom one reads the Bible (West, 1999). But even more so, it makes a difference who is reading, leading, teaching, interpreting, and organizing. The Reading the Bible with the Poor, drawing on the lineage of past movements, privileges the poor and oppressed, not as objects of biblical interpretation, but as biblical interpreters, knowledge producers, and necessary agents of change. Doing so is both a product of Reading the Bible with the Poor, and also the pedagogy of it.

### Jesus was a Poor Man: Shifting the Narrative

The Reading the Bible with the Poor's tenet of the poor as epistemological change agents is rooted in the biblical text itself. Through an historical and economic study of the background of the New Testament, biblical scholars have discussed the social class of Jesus, the disciples, and the masses of people to whom they ministered. The declaration that Jesus was a poor man and God is on the side of the oppressed is more than a figurative interpretation of scripture, but a reality of the economic conditions. Jesus, who organized a diverse group of leaders who were trained and educated in the Hebrew scriptures and in a critique of the dominant, oppressive empire, is the exemplar of a leader from the ranks of the poor organizing a movement of the poor for liberation. Howard Thurman's understanding of Jesus's poverty and the masses of the poor with which he ministered and the 1968 Poor People's Campaign's slogan on the Mule Train that "Jesus was a

poor man” acknowledged this deep truth of Jesus’s social class. That same phrase is stitched onto stoles worn by clergy in today’s PPC:NCMR which have been confiscated at protests and declared “too political” (L. Theoharis, personal communication, June 29, 2018).

The dominant narrative of biblical interpretation often erases the economic and social class circumstances of the empire and the people who were poor and oppressed. This erasure of the historical and economic circumstances surrounding the biblical stories and the ways that God’s people throughout scripture resisted the power of the empire has served to maintain hegemonic narratives and power of the ruling class for thousands of years. The poor as social movement leaders, like Jesus, who read and interpret scripture and build movements for social change are pedagogical and epistemological challenges to dominant narratives. The leadership of the poor and dispossessed as biblical knowledge producers and social change agents is a challenge to structures and systems that exist to maintain the power of the ruling class.

*Jesus, who organized a diverse group of leaders who were trained and educated in the Hebrew scriptures and in a critique of the dominant, oppressive empire, is the exemplar of a leader from the ranks of the poor organizing a movement of the poor for liberation.*

One of the ways the dominant, hegemonic narrative is maintained is through the erasure of history. Some scholars have noted that radical and revolutionary efforts have been dismissed from history because multiracial groups of the organized poor were engaged in class-based critique and action (Chase, 1998). Entire pieces of history are lost or distorted to hide the power of the poor and dispossessed united across race and other differences to act for change, as well as to hide the power of faith and scripture that undergird such movements when the poor and oppressed interpret texts. Leopando (2017) asserts that Freire’s faith and theological motivations were erased from others’ writings about his development of critical pedagogy and praxis. The history of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union and the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign has been suppressed, especially the multi-racial leadership of these movements. This erasure serves to perpetuate the dominant narrative and limit the implementation of revolutionary critical pedagogy.

## Implications for Adult Educators

As Holst (2003) suggests, finding examples of revolutionary critical pedagogy outside of the academy can provide instructive lessons and questions for critical reflection for adult educators. The Reading the Bible with the Poor methodology and influences from other poor people’s movements pose a challenge to adult educators to consider how our profession might have hidden stories and contributed to the distorted, hegemonic narrative about poverty and the poor. Poor leaders who study and apply the Scriptures critically within movement building are knowledge producers and change agents. There are examples throughout the history of adult education of the agency of the poor and marginalized as knowledge producers and change agents, including the examples of historic social movements that have influenced the Reading the Bible with the Poor methodology. Yet, often these narratives are lost within the lexicon of the adult education profession. How can adult education and critical pedagogy continue to embody the revolutionary

history of adult learning within poor people's movements? How can we continue to interrogate distorted narratives about the poor and critically reflect upon our contributions to those hegemonic narratives to instigate change?

*There are examples throughout the history of adult education of the agency of the poor and marginalized as knowledge producers and change agents, including the examples of historic social movements that have influenced the Reading the Bible with the Poor methodology.*

Similarly, changing the narrative about poverty and the poor requires an acute understanding of how the dominant and distorted narrative of the causes of poverty is constructed. Reading the Bible with the Poor practitioners regularly discuss the questions of “who are the poor” and “why are

we poor”, rooted in a Marxist understanding of social class and neoliberal capitalism (Baptist & Theoharis, n.d.). Adult educators, especially those concerned with social justice, can engage in continual reflective practice on our own positionality as it relates to poverty, social class, and neoliberal capitalism. One learning activity that practitioners of Reading the Bible with the Poor frequently utilize is personal poverty maps which ask participants to map their relationship to poverty throughout their life (Baptist & Rehmann, 2011). Many times this activity reveals current or past struggles of poverty, dispossession, or marginalization that are often hidden within the dominant discourse of the poverty line and who is poor. What organizers of the PPC: NCMR assert is that before the COVID-19 pandemic there were over 140 million poor and low-income people in the U.S. (Sarkar, Gupta Barnes, & Noffke, n.d.) and that the pandemic revealed and worsened this level of poverty. As is often said within the Freedom Church of the Poor when citing Matthew 25:31-46, the least of these is most of us.

Further, adult educators and the adult education profession are embedded within the neoliberal capitalistic policies pervading our society (Zacharakis & Holloway, 2016). As social justice adult educators, we might explore our own positionality in relationship to how neoliberal definitions of poverty and dispossession have purposefully disguised the scope of those impacted by poverty and how our own lives and livelihoods are embedded in a neoliberal ideology. Exploration of one's positionality in the context of neoliberal capitalism may lead beyond allyship to class solidarity among those of us who are not part of the ruling class. To explore one's positionality in such a way is an embodiment of revolutionary critical pedagogy that is situated within an analysis of social class unity and not identity (Allman, 2010), which is a contribution to shifting the narrative about poverty and the poor.

## CONCLUSION

Reading the Bible with the Poor serves as an example of revolutionary critical pedagogy that has been influenced by other movements for liberation led by the poor and oppressed rooted in faith and moral values. The historic influences upon the Reading the Bible with the Poor methodology and the pedagogy of it provide implications for adult educators to further explore our history, epistemological assumptions, and positionality, especially in relationship to neoliberal capitalism. Future research is needed to explore the role of sacred texts from other

religious traditions in movements for liberation, as well as the role of faith and sacred texts in social movement learning. Further exploration of the historic influences on the Reading the Bible with the Poor methodology might continue to uncover hidden stories that illuminate the intersectionalities of oppression, including class, race, gender and gender identity, ability, sexual orientation, and the environment. Finally, adult educators for social justice should persist in uncovering lost histories of adult learning for social change exemplified through the unity of the poor and dispossessed across difference.

## REFERENCES

- About. (n.d.). Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. <http://poorpeoplescampaign.org/about/>
- Alfred, M.V. (2016). Creating space for social justice education in an era of global and neoliberal capitalism: An imperative for adult education. *Dialogues in Social Justice: An Adult Education Journal*, 1(1), 31-34.
- Allman, P. (2010). *Critical education against global capitalism: Karl Marx and revolutionary critical education* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Sense Publishers.
- Alston, O. (2009). Breaking boundaries: 7 ways to build a movement that includes poor and rich. *Sojourners*, March, 2-4.
- Baptist, W. & Damico, N. (2005). Building the new freedom church of the poor. *CrossCurrents*, 55(3), 352-363.
- Baptist, W. & Jones, D. (n.d.). "A new and unsettling force": *The leadership of the poor*. Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice. <https://kairoscenter.org/the-leadership-of-the-poor>
- Baptist, W. & Rehmann, J. (2011). *Pedagogy of the poor: Building the movement to end poverty*. Teachers College Press.
- Baptist, W. & Theoharis, L. (2015). Reading the Bible with the poor. In B. Worthington (Ed.), *Reading the Bible in the age of crisis* (21-51). Augsburg Fortress.
- Baptist, W. & Theoharis, L. (n.d.). "Questions must be raised": *Who are the poor and why are we poor?* Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice. <https://kairoscenter.org/who-are-the-poor/>
- Barnes, A. (2020, May 23). *Freedom church of the poor*. University of the Poor. <http://universityofthepoor.org/freedom-church-of-the-poor/>
- Cardenal, E. (1977). *The gospel in Solentiname* (D.D. Walsh, Trans.). Maryknoll.
- Caruso, C. (2019). *A new and unsettling force: Information technology, popular education, and the movement to end poverty* [Doctoral dissertation, City University of New York]. CUNY Academic Works. [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_etds/3103/](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/3103/)
- Chadwick, J. & Hribar, C. (2007). Solidarity with the poor. *Response: The voice of women in mission*, February, 30-33.
- Chase, R.T. (1998). *Class resurrection: The Poor People's Campaign of 1968 and Resurrection City*. {essays in history}: <http://www.esaysinhistory.com/class-resurrection-the-poor-peoples-campaign-of-1968-and-resurrection-city/>
- Cone, J. (2001). *God of the oppressed*. Orbis Books. (Original work published 1975).
- Dorrien, G. (2018). True religion, mystical unity, and the disinherited: Howard Thurman and the Black Social Gospel. *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy*, 39(1), 74-98.
- Ekblad, B. (2005). *Reading the bible with the damned*. Westminster John Knox Press.
- Gellman, E.S. & Roll, J. (2011). *The gospel of the working class: Labor's southern prophets in New Deal America*. University of Chicago Press.
- George, T. & Dockery, D.S. (1990). *Baptist Theologians*. Broadman Press.
- Gutiérrez, G. (1988). *A theology of liberation: History, politics, and salvation*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Orbis Books. (Original work published 1971).
- Hall, C. (2019). *Insights from reading the Bible with the poor*. Augsburg Fortress.
- Hamilton, R. (2016). The Mule Train – Adult learning and the Poor People's Campaign of 1968. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 48(1), 38-64. DOI: [10.1080/02660830.2016.1155848](https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2016.1155848)
- Holst, J.D. (2003). Revolutionary critical education: In defense of a theory and a challenge to seek out those who practice it. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 1(4), 341-348.
- Holst, J.D. (2006). Paulo Freire in Chile, 1964-1969: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in its sociopolitical economic context. *Harvard Educational Review*, 76(2), 243-270.

- Horton, M. & Freire, P. (1990). *We make the road by walking: Conversations on education and social change*. Bell, B. Gaventa, J., & Peters, J. (Eds.). Temple University Press.
- Kairos Center. (2020a, May 7). *A Poor People's History of Wall Street* [Video]. YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M\\_O5S6qcJ8U&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_O5S6qcJ8U&feature=emb_title)
- Kairos Center. (2020b, May 31). *Freedom Church of the Poor* [Video]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/povertyinitiative/videos/557310048262438/>
- Kairos Staff. (n.d.). *Paulo Ueti and Gislei Knierim at the Kairos Center*. Kairos Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice. <https://kairoscenter.org/mst-visit/>
- Kell, D. (2020, April 27). *We cried power* [Video]. Vimeo. <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/wecriedpower>
- King, M. (1968). *The trumpet of conscience* (1<sup>st</sup> U.S. ed., CBC Massey lectures; 1967). Harper & Row.
- Leopando, I. (2017). *A pedagogy of faith: The theological vision of Paulo Freire*. Bloomsbury.
- McLaren, P. (1998). Revolutionary pedagogy in post-revolutionary times: Rethinking the political economy of critical education. *Educational Theory*, 48(4), 431-462.
- McLaren, P. (2010). Revolutionary critical pedagogy. *Inter Actions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, 7, 1-11.
- McLaren, P. (2017). Into the darkness: Revolutionary critical pedagogy for a social society: A manifesto. In Butler, M., Mecheril, P., & Brenningmeyer, L. (Eds.), *Resistance: Subjects, representations, contexts* (173-189). Transcript Verlag.
- Moraes, M. (2003). The path of dissent: An interview with Peter McLaren. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 1(2), 117-134.
- Patterson, W.M. (1972). Walter Rauschenbush: Baptist exemplar of social concern. *Baptist History and Heritage*, 7.
- Sarkar, S., Gupta Barnes, S., & Noffke, A. (n.d.). *The souls of poor folk: Auditing America 50 years after the Poor People's Campaign challenged racism, poverty, the war economy/militarism, and our national morality*. Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. <http://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/audit/>
- Schüssler Fiorenza, E. (2009). *Democratizing biblical studies: Toward an emancipator educational space*. Westminster John Knox Press.
- Skærlund Risager, B. (2016). Neoliberalism is a political project: An interview with David Harvey. *Jacobin*. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/07/david-harvey-neoliberalism-capitalism-labor-crisis-resistance/>
- Theoharis, E. (2014). *Will "The Poor Be With You Always?": Towards a methodological approach of Reading the Bible with the poor* [Doctoral dissertation, Union Theological Seminary]. Columbia Academic Commons. <https://doi.org/10.7916/D85Q4T7D>
- Theoharis, L. (n.d.). *Reading the Bible with the poor*. Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice. <https://kairoscenter.org/reading-the-bible-with-the-poor/>
- Theoharis, L. (2015). Reading the Bible with the poor: A biblical hermeneutic for social transformation. In *The spirit of struggle: Writings on religions and human rights*. (15-23), Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice.
- Theoharis, L. (2017). *Always with us? What Jesus really said about the poor*. Eerdmans Publishing.
- Theoharis, L., Riley, S.A., Scott, A., Williams, J.C., Williams, E.N., Baptist, W., Chadwick, D., McNeil, E., & Wessel-McCoy, C. (2019). *Jesus led a poor people's campaign: Sermons from the movement to end poverty*. Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice.
- Theoharis, L. & Wessel-McCoy, C. (n.d.). "More than flinging a coin": True compassion as a critique of charity. Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice. <https://kairoscenter.org/compassion-as-a-critique-of-charity/>
- Thurman, H. (1996). *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Beacon Press. (Original work published 1949).
- Ueti, P. (n.d.). *Contextual Bible study*. Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice <https://kairoscenter.org/contextual-biblestudy/>
- Wessel-McCoy, C. (2017). "Freedom Church of the Poor": Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision for a Poor People's Campaign and its lessons for today. [Doctoral dissertation, Union Theological Seminary. ProQuest. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1904400562/?pq-origsite=primo>
- West, G. (1999). *The academy of the poor: Towards a dialogical reading of the Bible*. Academic Press.
- Zacharakis-Jutz, J. (1988). Post-Freirean adult education: A question of empowerment and power. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 39(1), 41-47.
- Zacharakis, J. & Holloway, J. (2016). The murky waters of neoliberal marketization and commodification on the education of adults in the United States. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 7(2), 223-236.



**Rev. Jessica C. Williams**, *Kansas State University*, is a PhD student in Adult Learning and Leadership at Kansas State University. She is also on staff at Central Seminary and is active with the Freedom Church of the Poor and Kansas Poor People's Campaign. She is an ordained American Baptist Pastor.

**Susan M. Yelich Biniecki**, *Kansas State University*, is an Associate Professor in Adult Learning and Leadership at Kansas State University. She serves as the Coordinator of the Social Justice Education Graduate Certificate at Kansas State University and has engaged in community development practice nationally and internationally. Her research addresses adult learning in diverse, international contexts including continuing professional education, the military, and sites of cultural memory.

