

The Theological Library and Its Social Responsibility

A Balance Between Being and Doing

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This chapter aims to raise awareness about the realities of the Latin American context, identify the work carried out by theological libraries within this environment, and understand how information professionals connect with the users and communities they serve under diverse circumstances. These insights will enable readers to renew their vision regarding the service the theological library offers to academia, the church, and society. Likewise, it will serve as an opportunity to reconsider the perspective and concept that information professionals and library support staff have regarding the user.

The theological library, beyond being a space for preservation and research, also bears a social responsibility that links it actively to its surroundings. Such responsibility implies an ethical commitment to the communities it serves. Throughout this text, we explore how the theological library can align its practices with users' real

needs by promoting inclusive practices, transformative dialogue, and information management that responds to social challenges and contributes to the building of more just and caring communities.

Historical and Social Challenges for the Theological Library in Colombia

It is not surprising that in Colombia, where widespread violence has been a dominant factor for more than eighty years, it was often instrumentalized to victimize countless people. González Arano and Molinares Guerrero (2010) argue that armed groups in Colombia have used violence as a tool of pressure to achieve various objectives: “Violence that has historically been used to resolve differences manifests itself in social, political, economic, and family spheres”¹ (353).²

It is necessary to examine the current reality in light of the historical events that marked the beginnings of the church in Colombia and Latin America. According to Bucana (1995), between 1841 and 1900, there were strong waves of generalized violence on Colombian territory, stemming from public dissatisfaction with the ruling government. During that period, the church faced significant challenges that tested its resilience and commitment to its mission.³

Violence has also hindered progress and education for decades. As a result, some users in theological libraries are victims of displacement, uprooted from their homes and families, often without the possibility of returning. Displacement and its impact must be understood from the perspective of those who have fled due to violence or extreme poverty. In fact, some students come from rural churches and arrive with the hope of improving their living conditions. As Meneses (2008) explains, “Poverty is not only a matter of lack of income but also of human and intellectual development”⁴ (50; author’s translation). In this context, as Hays (2018) expresses, “displaced persons need accompaniment to heal”⁵ (22). The institution—and therefore the library—becomes a space that receives and embraces each story, taking on the academic, technological, and restorative challenges students bring with them.

These educational barriers not only hinder access to knowledge but also impact the self-perception and integral development of individuals from rural backgrounds. Luz Peña, a seminary

student, experienced this reality and found in the library a space for transformation.

Luz Peña arrived at the seminary in 2023, at age nineteen, from a rural village. A shy young woman with limited resources, often made invisible by her fears and insecurities, she shares (personal communication, February 27, 2025), “I arrived after trying to get into other universities. At that time, I struggled significantly with writing, as the education I received was not of the highest quality. However, the library has been fundamental to my formation, because in the pages of books is the knowledge of many people. In fact, I recently started reading novels.”⁶

Working in the library helped her develop communication skills, discipline, punctuality, and a heart for service. It also strengthened her spiritual and ministerial life, as she became actively involved in missionary and evangelistic groups.

To meet users’ needs, it is necessary to draw closer to the church and understand its context and surrounding circumstances. As Meneses (2008) emphasizes, “A library service for those who suffer a diminished dignity is a matter of justice that should move and inspire us to develop and consolidate social inclusion policies”⁷ (48). Justice involves principles of equity, equality, and opportunity for all, which implies ensuring all users can access information.

The Social Responsibility of the Theological Library

The theological library carries a dual responsibility: it must contribute to the formative development of its users and respond to the social needs of its community. The Fundación Universitaria Seminario Bíblico de Colombia (FUSBC) library is located in an intercultural context where students face separation from their families and places of origin. The library, therefore, aims to integrate social well-being policies for “creating spaces that guarantee peace of mind and human satisfaction through reading and promote the full development of individuals”⁸ (Meneses 2008, 48). The library needs to offer comprehensive support, foster spaces for social interaction, and guide students’ reading of the world so they may overcome the past, be critical of the present, and contribute to the future.

The violence and displacement, far from being confined to the media or reduced to statistics, manifest themselves in the daily

experiences of those who arrive at theological libraries. Deiner José Espitia Diaz, a graduate of FUSBC, is a concrete example of this reality. Having been born in Planeta Rica, Córdoba, at the age of 42 he has already experienced three forced displacements due to violence (personal communication, March 28, 2025). His family was affected by massacres, kidnappings, and extortion, forcing him to relocate multiple times in search of safety. Despite these difficulties, he, together with his wife, began a ministry for children and planted a church. However, new threats forced him to flee once again.

Thanks to the seminary's Sabbatical Plan, he received psychological support, housing, and the opportunity to take some courses. This marked the beginning of his theological training, which culminated in his graduation in 2024. He highlights the fundamental role the library played in both his academic and ministerial development: "Among all the things the seminary taught me, it taught me how to read well—not only books, but also contexts and people—and how to write well."⁹ Deiner believes the library gave him the necessary tools to carry out his ministry. He now serves in two ministries with the Prison Fellowship of Colombia, where he works with ex-combatants and shares the gospel through audio and video with people deprived of liberty.

Deiner's testimony reveals the potential of the library as a space for restoration and formation. His story demonstrates not only the value of academic resources but also the importance of institutional support in contexts of suffering. It is a call to extend library services to those who cannot easily access them. In response to this need, the FUSBC library has developed a project called Repositorio Cristiano Interinstitucional (REPCI, a Digital Repository for Latin America and the Caribbean, <https://repci.co>), which integrates resources from various institutions across Latin America, preserves the historical heritage of the church, and offers open access to these resources.

The theological library supports the work of forming and strengthening ministries that contribute to the recovery of vulnerable populations, understanding vulnerability as the condition of those who, "due to their social, economic, and cultural conditions—on the one hand—and their physical, sensory, intellectual, or psychological conditions—on the other—may suffer violations of their human rights"¹⁰ (Meneses 2008, 51).

The Ethical Contribution of the Librarian in a Context Marked by Corruption

The theological librarian assumes an even greater ethical responsibility in the face of the moral challenges posed by contemporary culture, in which misconduct tends to be normalized and corruption has infiltrated all spheres of society. This issue originates in the home, reproduces in schools, and becomes evident in the workplace.

In many environments, the boundaries between right and wrong have become blurred, giving rise to practices, such as corruption, that contradict the values of the gospel. As Acosta (2018) rightly states, “Corruption is the improper use of power granted by a position or social role to obtain personal benefits or to benefit third parties”¹¹ (12). Corruption is often linked to power, specifically the ability to access resources due to one’s position or opportunity, as well as the power to belong to a particular group or access certain information. Corruption is the misuse of power, whether exclusive or privileged, to gain personal advantage or recognition.

This phenomenon is a part of Latin American culture, in which personal relationships often take precedence over adherence to rules. When writing about corruption in Latin America, Acosta (2018) also addresses the understanding that many people believe they cannot let their friends down, as they consider family ties and friendships to be of paramount importance.¹²

Related to this reality are the results of a study the library conducted among students in the seminary’s nonformal program, to evaluate the decrease in resource use and the frequency of library visits. It found some students did not consider it necessary to go to the library because they had a classmate who was a ‘wizard’ at finding any book on the web and would then circulate it freely. This reveals an ethical problem not only in those who distribute the material but also in those who make use of it. Steps must be taken to address these challenges, and the participation of all actors involved is essential. This includes implementing educational campaigns, encouraging faculty commitment to legality, and providing support in the use and acquisition of appropriate resources. In the same spirit, teachers should promote the library as a safe, consistent, and relevant space.

Additionally, the same study found that of eighty students surveyed, 50% complete their assignments by searching the web. This

trend has become a significant challenge for education, as current generations struggle to invest the required time and effort in searching for information. They prefer everything ‘easy and fast,’ often starting their work by copying ideas from the Internet and AI tools without analyzing them or giving credit to the authors.

The FUSBC library aligns itself with the institutional mission as a foundational axis: “to train persons called by God” (FUSBC) who prepare to bring transformation to their communities and respond faithfully to their calling. Thus, the library actively integrates the institutional mission of forming men and women called by God, prepared to bring transformation to their communities from an ethical perspective. Within this framework, access to bibliographic resources is not only an academic issue, but also an opportunity to foster processes of restoration and personal growth.

Edwin Jara, a student at the institution, is a clear example of this. Coming from a region affected by violence and with a history of forced displacement, he arrived at FUSBC with limited communication and digital skills. “I had never before had access to such a wide range of bibliographic resources,”¹³ he explains. This access, coupled with the support he received, has allowed him not only to advance in his theological studies but also to reinterpret his personal history through the lens of faith and principles of justice, reconciliation, and forgiveness. “Like Joseph, I have come to see how all the harm done to us, God used it for good”¹⁴ (personal communication, March 21, 2025).

Edwin’s experience illustrates how the library, by facilitating equitable access to knowledge, can catalyze ethical and vocational transformation. His relationship with the library, along with the literature and courses he has taken, has helped him process forgiveness and reconciliation, and prepare for pastoral ministry. He now sees the library as a space for holistic growth and suggests more literature be promoted to help heal those who have suffered displacement, just as he did.

In this context, ethics cannot be reduced to mere obedience to external norms; instead, there must be a transformation of character. As Polo (2007) aptly states, “Virtue is what makes a person master of themselves; vice, on the other hand, deprives them of freedom. Thus, the alternative does not reside only in the choice of the act, but affects the very being of the person”¹⁵ (155).

It is essential to remember that the ethics of Christ are based on love for God and neighbor, and this is only possible when a person’s life is led by the Holy Spirit. As Polo (2007) affirms, “God must be

loved above all things... love is superior to any other act of piety”¹⁶ (159).

It is this love that does not violate the rights of others in pursuit of personal gain. It is a genuine love that seeks to give each person the best of oneself: respect, honor, and recognition. This is the perfect love of Christ described by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13—the kind of love that recognizes the importance and value of what others have written, and expresses biblical ethics in all relationships.

Final Proposals for a Library Committed to Social Well-Being

The FUSBC library is an extension of the academic institution and bears the responsibility of forming agents of change. It is part of the broader process of preparing men and women called to serve God, the church, and society. Therefore, it must assume an ethical and social responsibility that meets the demands of today’s challenges.

The library must eliminate access barriers by ensuring resources are available to remote students, displaced individuals, and those in rural areas, through digital libraries, community alliances, and mobile strategies.

It should also form a biblical ethical framework, promoting a culture of integrity in the use of information through pedagogy and example, integrating love and justice as the foundation of every library action.

Listening to and giving visibility to people’s stories is equally important. Life testimonies must be recognized as part of the institutional heritage. To humanize library services is to accompany, guide, and give value to each person’s story.

Comprehensive support is also necessary, creating environments that foster academic, emotional, and spiritual growth, and encouraging restorative relationships and spaces for meaningful interaction.

Overall, the library should focus on forming agents of transformation. It plays an active role in the institutional mission, and its efforts should be aimed at preparing men and women to bring hope to their communities, with critical thinking, compassion, and ethical coherence.

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- REPCI. Repositorio Cristiano Interinstitucional [Inter-Agency Christian Repository]. <https://repci.co>.

Notes

- 1 Spanish original: “La violencia ha sido una vía utilizada históricamente por la sociedad para resolver sus diferencias entre sí y que esta puede ser de tipo social, político, económico, familiar, entre otras.” (González Arano and Molinares Guerrero 2010, 353)
- 2 All translations from Spanish are by the author.
- 3 Spanish original: “Según Bucana, entre 1841 y 1900 se produjeron fuertes oleadas de violencia generalizada en el territorio colombiano debido a la inconformidad de la población con el gobierno de turno. Durante ese periodo, la iglesia enfrentó desafíos significativos que pusieron a prueba su resiliencia y el compromiso con su misión.” (Bucana 1995, 133)
- 4 Spanish original: “Un problema no sólo de falta de ingresos sino también de progreso humano e intelectual.” (Meneses 2008, 50)
- 5 Spanish original: “las personas en situación de desplazamiento necesitarían un acompañamiento para recuperarse.” (Hays 2018, 22)
- 6 Spanish original: “Llegué después de haber intentado entrar a otras universidades. En ese momento, estaba muy mal en redacción, puesto que la educación que recibí no fue la mejor. Considero que la biblioteca ha sido clave para mi formación, porque en las páginas de los libros está plasmado el conocimiento de muchas personas.” (Peña 2025)
- 7 Spanish original: “Un servicio de biblioteca para quienes sufren un menoscabo en su dignidad es un imperativo de justicia que nos debe sensibilizar e impulsar, a generar y consolidar políticas de inclusión social.” (Meneses 2008, 48)
- 8 Spanish original: “Crear espacios que garanticen tranquilidad y satisfacción humana mediante la lectura y promover el desarrollo pleno de los individuos.” (Meneses 2008, 48)
- 9 Spanish original: “Dentro de todas las cosas que el Seminario me enseñó, me enseñó a leer bien, no sólo libros, el contexto, las personas y a escribir bien.” (Espitia Díaz, 2025)
- 10 Spanish original: “por sus condiciones sociales, económicas y culturales, por un lado, físicas, sensoriales, intelectuales o psicológicas, por el otro, pueden sufrir vejaciones contra sus derechos humanos.” (Meneses 2008, 51)

- 11 Spanish original: “La corrupción es la utilización indebida que un individuo hace del poder que le da un cargo o posición social para obtener beneficios personales o para terceros.” (Acosta 2018, 12)
- 12 Spanish original: “uno no puede quedar mal con los amigos... Las relaciones familiares y las amistades hay que conservarlas por encima de todo.” (Acosta 2018, 19)
- 13 Spanish original: “Nunca antes había tenido acceso a una oferta bibliográfica tan amplia” (Jara, 2025)
- 14 Spanish original: “Como José, he entendido cómo todo el mal que nos hicieron, Dios lo usó para bien.” (Jara, 2025)
- 15 Spanish original: “Es la virtud lo que hace al hombre dueño de sí; en cambio, los vicios privan de libertad. Así pues, la alternativa no reside solo en la elección del acto, sino que afecta al ser mismo del hombre.” (Polo 2007, 155)
- 16 Spanish original: “A Dios hay que amarlo por encima de todas las cosas.” (Polo 2007, 159)