

## HOPE: Theological and Missiological Reflections from Latin America

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In theological reflection we need to include two key coordinates which frame and personalize our task. The first one has to do with the context in which we fulfill God's mission. Biblically we have no doubt that, although the church is not of the world, it is in it; and when it reflects upon its faith, it does so in dialogue with that reality. But also, theological reflection has a missiological coordinate, which reminds us that this task is not an end in itself; but rather, it achieves its purpose only when it keeps itself closely linked to the being and doings of the church and is converted into a tool that gives direction in the fulfillment of God's mission.

This brief essay attempts to keep both coordinates in mind. It reflects theologically upon Christian Hope taken in the context of Latin America and in the perspective of bringing forward the essentials for the fulfillment of the church's mission on this continent.

At the present time, crises of all kinds are assaulting Latin America. The much longed for political, economic, and social stability, instead of coming closer, would seem to be getting ever more distant. In the face of this situation, to speak of hope would seem to be counterproductive and even prohibitive because social indicators are not very encouraging. Nevertheless, for these very reasons, reflecting upon this theme requires that it be an obligatory aspect of the agenda of the Lord's church, which is serving in this part of the world.

The marked contrasts of Latin American reality are not only evident in ethnic, cultural, and geographic aspects, but they also cut through social and economic life. Obviously, any description of Latin America will be insufficient in elaborating a profile of such a complex reality. But for the purpose of this essay, it will be sufficient to say that recent decades have been marked by the accentuation of social disparities: fragile and slow resurgence of democracies; deficient access to basic services such as health, education, and housing reflected specifically in the increase of extreme poverty; growth of problems such as drug-trafficking, foreign indebtedness, generalized corruption; sharpening of the problem of overpopulation; heightening of the indices of unemployment and underdevelopment; and the crises of traditional political dialogue, among other aspects.

The years pass inexorably without anything changing significantly, bearing with them feelings of frustration and disenchantment. Paradoxically, although hopelessness exists, there is also a great hunger and need to trust in something or someone, which has become evident in the proliferation of religious offers that have seduced many Latin Americans in recent years.

What theological, ethical, and missiological implications can be derived from our definition of Christian hope? In the light of the Scriptures, we know that hope is the expectation that all that God has promised will be fulfilled. Hope is synonymous with trust in God and His faithfulness (Rom. 4:18-22; 5:2). But, what does it mean to reflect on Christian hope in a context charged with hopelessness and frustration?

Evidently there exists a direct relationship between theology and mission. In the manner in which we understand our theology, thus, we live and develop our ministry. In that sense, the way we conceive of Christian hope is, in fact, going to influence our lifestyle and the mission models that we implement. In the following, two counterpoised conceptions of Christian hope will be contrasted, and each of them will be related to some missiological emphases.

The first conception of hope, marked by an apocalyptic orientation, assumes a fundamentally eschatological (understood in the strictly etymological meaning of the term) understanding. Under this approach, the concept of the Kingdom of God and Christian hope is exclusively futuristic and the current situation in which the church lives should be understood only as a transitional time of waiting that is impossible to transform. In this sense, the mission of the church is defined in terms of proclaiming the Gospel as a tool to hasten the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus. This conception has precipitated in many cases, under an escapist nuance, an eschatological paralysis that has blocked the church from participating in the social life of our nations.

The second conception, framed theologically by the tension between the “already” and the “not yet” of the Kingdom of God, understands hope not only in future *terms*, but in present terms also. Through Jesus Christ the Kingdom of God has burst forth into history, therefore, it is at once a present reality and a promise that still has to be fulfilled. This means that the future has become the present. In this perspective, the mission of the church, while it lives within that eschatological tension between the inauguration and the full manifestation of the Kingdom, is to embody the values of the Kingdom and be an agent for change in society.

Based on this second concept, as the Lord's Church, do we have something to say or do for those that “live without hope” in Latin America? We probably have more questions than answers with respect to this, but with the purpose of initiating dialogue, I should like to suggest some direction lines for reflection—action.

First, we have to avoid reducing our definition of hope to the longing for the immediate satisfaction of our material needs. There is a danger of being trapped within the postulates of the Theologies of Prosperity which, taking advantage of the brutal contemporary social reality, are promoting a mutilated and individualistic Gospel that offers material and economic well-being without a life transformation.

Second, biblically, Christian hope is centered in Jesus Christ and his redemptive work (Eph. 2: 12; Col. 1:27; 1 Tim. 1:1). Because HE entered the world and history, we have hope (1 Pet. 1:3). Under this perspective, incarnation is not only a transcendent theological event, but also, a paradigm of the fulfillment of the church's mission. Incarnational evangelism, to which we are called by the Gospel, centered on the Word that became human, needs to be carried out in the context of service; and this service is as multifaceted as the needs of humanity.<sup>1</sup>

Third, Christian hope in the context of the church's mission needs to be harmonized with God's purpose of forming a new humanity in Jesus Christ (Eph. 2: 13-16) and in the power of the Spirit (Acts 1:18; 1 Thess. 1:5). It is a divine project that transcends personal ambience and has a social dimension. According to the New Testament, hope in Christ is never egocentric, but rather oriented to the kingship of God in which he shall be "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28). God's purpose is to form a community of the King, which is a "gathering of persons called to serve Him and to live together in a true Christian community as a testimony to the character and the values of his Kingdom."<sup>2</sup>

In the fourth place, when we reflect upon our faith and the hope that we have in Jesus Christ, we need to become aware of the grave situation being experienced by the vast majorities on this continent in crisis. In the context of the incarnational paradigm of Jesus and the church as a community of the King, what does it mean to fulfill God's mission in Latin America today?

The mission of the church, conceived of in its integrity, has as its fundamental premise that God's purpose is to reconcile all creation through Jesus Christ (Eph. 1: 9-10; 2 Cor. 5:19; Col. 1:20). The Fall affected the relationship between humans and God, but also humanity's relationship with itself, with fellow humans, and with creation. Therefore, when we speak of an integral mission, we need to mean the reconstruction of all of human life and the restoration of all relationships affected by sin (Rom. 8:22-24).

This way of looking at things implies that, in order to fulfill God's mission in Latin America, we cannot obviate the raw reality in which persons are living, because God's purpose is to transform that situation. Scripturally, God's very design in creation takes into account that a human being is a unity of body, soul, and spirit, which are inseparable from each other and need to be tended. Because of this, our hope as believers cannot be strictly "futuristic." Our overwhelming reality beseeches us and demands answers drawn from the Gospel.

Through the various ministries of compassion and mercy toward our fellow humans, we can also demonstrate the redeeming love of God and give a testimony about Christ. Hope and salvation in Jesus Christ, even though there is a personal dimension, is not foreign to the community dimension. The demand of God's word is overwhelming; it teaches us that love for God is inseparable from love for our fellow humans (Matt. 22:39-40; 1 John 3:16-18). It is essential that persons in Latin America not only hear the Gospel, but that they also see our way of being and acting.

In that sense, the task of the church of the Lord, as the community of the King is to embody an alternative model before a suffering society and a generation without hope. We, as a visible expression and agent of the Kingdom, need to commit ourselves and participate responsibly in God's redemptive project and demonstrate that in Jesus Christ we find the true hope of complete transformation for Latin America.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>C. Rene Padilla.. "Itinerario de la misión integral: de CLADE I a CLADE II" En Iglesia y Misión (Buenos Aires: Kairós, 2001), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Howard Snyder. La Comunidad del Rey. (Mexico: Editorial Caribe, 1983).

<sup>3</sup>This new way of conceiving of mission was reflected in the Quito Declaration, which was formulated after the celebration of the third Latin American Evangelization - Congress (CLADE III), which called together 1080 persons representing countries of this continent. See CLADE III: Tercer Congreso Latinoamericano de Evangelización. Todo el Evangelio para todos los pueblos desde América Latina (Quito: Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana, 1992), pp. 855-861.