

**“WE ARE A MISSIONAL PEOPLE”: THE MISSION IN CONTEXT OF THE
WESLEYAN TRADITION**

(Reaction to the paper by Christian Sarmiento)

By W. Scott Meador

Country of Origin: United States

Serving in: United States

I congratulate the organizers and sponsors of the First Ibero-American Theological Conference for their initiative, effort and support of this historically important event for the development of the Latin American church, by means of theological reflection and dialogue. I also congratulate Dr. Christian Sarmiento for the contribution of his Biblical exposition that remind us that God himself in the foundation of the mission and that he calls us to share in it. Dr. Sarmiento shows us his great communicative and hermeneutical capacity, opening his heart and sharing his passion for multiplying churches where believers are disciplined to reflect the likeness of Christ in love and holiness.

David Martin observes that classic Protestantism, when it arrived in Latin America, was obstructed by the worldview of the cultures that sent missionaries, similar to a seed sent in a flower pot that never was able to put down roots in the local soil.¹ If we desire multiplication of disciples that reflect the likeness of Christ in every culture of humanity, it is necessary to break the flower pot and allow the essence of our core values be expressed through the thought processes and languages of these cultures. The task that corresponds to Latin American theologians is communicating our beliefs through a cultural-linguistic indigenous expression without losing faithfulness to the Biblical message.

One supposes that one of the major purposes of the exercise is to articulate our core values, clearly communicated by the Board of General Superintendents, now **in the Ibero-American context** giving “boundaries of action that give viability or a body to the values.” Because of this, the organizers of the Theological Conference requested papers from the perspective of its own context of Ibero-America. It appears to me that Dr. Sarmiento’s exposition, although very well written with an excellent Biblical content, does not give sufficient Latin flavor and does not reach the contextualization hoped for. For example, Dr. Sarmiento observes, “The presence of God is magnified by people filled with him that show tangibly and practically the image of God.” Very good, but how can the likeness of God, “tangibly and practically” in the department of Peten in Guatemala, in Barrancas, Venezuela, or in Cartago in Costa Rica? What can other nations or people-groups of the world learn from the manner in which the cultures of Latin America reflect the holiness and love of God? The fact that Latinos tend to give a lot of importance to interpersonal relationships at a deeper level than the “developed” countries with their individualistic orientation, would give the Latin American Wesleyan people greater credibility to their teaching of corporative Biblical holiness. Wesley insisted that the Bible does not know a solitary or individual holiness: “Christianity is essentially

¹ David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 231.

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a social religion, and whoever tries to make it solitary destroys it”² Latin American Wesleyan people should be the mentors that show tangibly and practically corporative personal holiness.

What more is there in the tradition, experience or the way of thinking of Latin Americans (thinking of the Wesleyan quadrilateral) that could serve in this task of contextualization? Hopefully a significant time during this Conference will be dedicated to this investigation.

To be a missional people in Latin America implies taking seriously the socio-cultural reality of the surroundings in which lives “three eras simultaneously.”³ Some are already postmodern, others are struggling to obtain the education and tools necessary to enter in the modernity of the past century, while many of the indigenous peoples “still live in a premodern world, surviving with the same tools and perspectives of their ancestors.” Our missional response and its methodology have to take into account these phenomena.

Dr Sarmiento begins his paper with a definition of the concept of mission: “to give a life for the salvation of others.” Such a definition refers to the mission of God incarnate and fulfilled by Jesus Christ who gave His life for the salvation of others. But our own participation in the mission of God requires another definition. To be a martyr is not necessarily the same as being missional, as the first represents an individualistic focus instead of a corporative one. Therefore, I am inclined towards the definition of mission offered by Bosch: “all of the church that brings the whole Gospel to the whole world.”⁴

Dr. Sarmiento correctly understands the distinction between *mission* (the singular sense of the mission of God) and *missions* (missionary projects). The second represents only a part of the mission of God. When we claim that we are a missional people we do not want to simply say that we send missionaries (even missionaries that are from Latin American countries) or that we participate in missionary programs, but that we are collaborators with God in the totality of his mission. We direct ourselves towards the mission of God in the singular sense helps us to avoid the following erroneous tendencies:

- The improper imposition of personnel and missionary programs that paralyze self-development of the church.
- The anxiety of adding people to the Church instead of involving the Church in the world.⁵
- The commercialized mentality of evangelism that tends to see people as “potential clients to be won” and where the multiplication of churches is presented in terms of “opening another branch.”⁶
- The erroneous representation of numerical growth as the main goal of the church.

Ismael Amaya spoke more than 25 years ago of an Evangelical Latin American Church as a Church, that, in spite of its fervor and evangelistic success, would be found without its own

² John Wesley, Sermon XXIV, *Sermones* (Kansas City: CNP, 1984), 388.

³ Juan Francisco Martínez, *Boletín de la Asociación Latinoamericana de Instituciones de Educación Teológica* (ALIET), mayo de 2000, 10.

⁴ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Changes in the Paradigm of the Theology of Mission* (Orbis, 1991), 26.

⁵ Jerry Cook, *Love, Acceptance and Forgiveness* (Regal Books, 1979), 45.

⁶ Bosch, 507.

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theology.⁷ Some would say the situation has not changed significantly after two and a half decades. Hopefully this Conference indicates a new day in Ibero-American theological initiative, in that all the participants will commit to transplanting Biblical and theological truths that have been given to us, to a current world of people who surround us in Latin America.

⁷ Ismael E. Amaya, “Reflexiones sobre el futuro de la educación teológica en América Latina”, *Heraldo de Santidad* (Kansas City: CNP, 2003), 26, first published in 1978.