

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY: WHAT IS AN EVANGELICAL?

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What is it to be evangelical? An important and necessary question. For the benefit of our conference I would like to integrate into the concept of the evangelical *the Latin American Nazarene evangelical church of today*.

It is very pertinent and necessary to do a self-introspection regarding our evangelical identity. To rediscover our identity is much of a pivotal labor as it is a permanent job of the church in development. In a summary of CLADE IV¹, the Britishmen John Corrie and Andrew Kirk, end their analysis with the observation:

The central point was that of **identity**: How will evangelicals be known as distinctive in the midst of religious plurality and the increasingly disconcerting manifestations of extreme spiritualities?²

In our case as Nazarenes already in 1994 Donald Metz warned us that

The Church of the Nazarene is experiencing a small identity crisis. The denomination is not very sure of “who or what” it is. The official declarations seem to be very clear. However, frequently personal practices or group practices do not completely endorse the published objectives. Our roots and mission are sufficiently clear. Our destiny depends on the practical and profound expression of our identity.³

About the identity, to which identity are we referring? What we were? What we are now? What we should be? Nor can we separate what we are from what we do; instead, what we do reflects something of what we are. So, what does it say about us the manner in which we have done our mission? Identity itself is something dynamic and changing. It is a dimension of human beings that is continually being constructed with a degree of intentionality. It is also worth asking the question, who would we like to be?

To talk about the evangelical church in Latin America creates a certain ambivalence because of its diversity. However, it should enjoy “a joint identity” that describes and guides its task. Metz suggests that

¹ Fourth Latin American Congress on Evangelism, sponsored by the FTL in Quito, Ecuador, September 2000.

² J. Corrie & A. Kirk, *CLADE IV: Fourth Latin American Congress on Evangelism: Evangelical Witness for the New Millennium: Word, Spirit and Mission* (http://www.ocms.ac.uk/news/20001009_clade.html).

³ Donald Metz, *Some Critical Issues in the Church of the Nazarene* (Kansas City: Wesleyan Heritage Press, 1994), 24.

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The institutional identity clarifies itself when three affirmations are recognized: The first affirmation expresses a precise picture of the group's origin—**its roots**. The second affirmation declares the reason for which the group exists—**its mission**. The third affirmation presents the practices and policies that signal the future of the institution—**its destiny**.⁴

I will follow this outline for our (approximation) of the identity of the Latin-American evangelical church.

ROOTS: OUR EVANGELICAL HERITAGE

The evangelical Church in Latin America is an expression of the Christian Church with a long historical trajectory.

The origin of the Latin-American evangelical church has focused on a variety of forms.⁵

Although evangelical Protestantism has been greatly influenced by the evangelicals in the United States “it takes on different meanings in its new place.”⁶ Stoll clarifies,

While in the United States *evangelical* connotes a conservative theology that places emphasis on the Bible, personal salvation and on evangelism, in Latin America, the word “evangelical” can refer to any Christian who is not a Catholic.⁷

Berg and Pretiz, in the introduction to their work *Mensajeros de esperanza: Los evangélicos* [Messengers of Hope: The Evangelicals], emphasize the importance of the history of the identity of the evangelical church in Latin America.

To know your religious history is to appreciate the tears, the pain and the courage of the first founders. To know the poverty is to understand the search for significance, the comfort the relief and the healing of the people in evangelical communities. To see their faith in action is to love them and better understand why the landscape of Latin America is changing due to evangelicals.⁸

These authors continue relating the history of the evangelicals on the basis of “five waves of evangelical advancement.”⁹ For his part, Emilio Núñez, a Latin American theologian, describes four general features that historically have characterized the evangelical majority, with a pejorative note that negates their real identity. According to him, the evangelical church has

⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁵ Among the following: (1) from the Apostolic Church, (2) from the Protestant Reformation, (3) from North American Evangelicalism, (4) from the arrival of Protestants in Latin America, (5) from the arrival of Pentecostalism to our lands.

⁶ David Stoll, *¿América Latina se vuelve protestante? Las políticas de crecimiento evangélico* (Quito: Ediciones Abya-Yala, 1993), 16.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ (Miami: Edit. Caribe), 24.

⁹ Ibid., 25. These waves are (1) the first churches of immigrants, (2) the mainline denominations, (3) the “faith missions”, (4) newer denominations, and (5) the churches that originated in Latin American.

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been reflected in “an ultra-conservative evangelism... a theological dualism... a spiritualization of evangelism... premillineum eschatology.”¹⁰

John Stott in his chapter *Evangelical Essentials (Esenciales Evangelicos)* takes another approach. He mentions that

To search for what it means to be evangelical, it is inevitable that we start with the gospel. Since our theology (evangelicalism) and our activity (evangelism) derive their meaning and their importance from the good news (the evangel).¹¹

Interestingly, Stott suggests that the discovery of our identity as Latin American evangelicals must begin with the gospel itself. So, it is a theological task based on three important driving questions: Where does the gospel come from? What does the gospel consist of? How can the gospel become effective? (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).¹²

We as Latin American Nazarenes must ask ourselves: How do we intersect our history with the development of evangelicals in Latin America? Are we evangelicals due to our own identification or because there was no other place to put us? In general terms, what is our Nazarene identity in relation to other evangelical groups? What have been our contributions across the years in the evangelical movement?

MISSION: OUR REASON FOR BEING

The Latin American Evangelical Church is a particular focus of the mission of the church.

From its beginnings the evangelical church saw as fundamental to its mission, to return to the heart of the Biblical message, motivated by the emphasis on fulfilling the Great Commission. It attempted to return to the apostolic church that lived its faith and was contagious to others. In Latin America, the mission of the Evangelical church had at least two moments. In the middle of the 19th century was the protestantizing of Catholics, evangelizing the Catholics so that they would live a new life in Christ by means of conversion, the reading of the Bible and public testimony of their new faith. The second moment, beginning early in the 20th century, was the pentecostalization of the Protestants, which also had its repercussions among Catholics, forming itself into the Charismatic movement.

In the second part of the 20th century the numerical growth among evangelicals has been significant.¹³ Of these numbers, Pentecostals compose 80% of the evangelical population in Latin America,¹⁴ so that “the evangelical church would be today an imperceptible minority if not

¹⁰ Emilio A. Nuñez, *Teología y misión: Perspectivas desde América Latina* (San Jose: Regional Office of World Vision International, 1996), 19-22.

¹¹ John Stott, *Evangelical Truth* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 29.

¹² Ibid., 29-34.

¹³ Patrick Johnstone, *Operación Mundo* (Bogotá, Centros de Literatura Cristiana, 1995), 51. Patrick Johnstone estimates that in 1993, 12.4% of all Latin Americans were Protestants. This is 51 million people, ten times more than the number of believers in 1960 (6.7 million).

¹⁴ Emilio Nuñez, op.cit., 19.

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for the presence of Pentecostals”.¹⁵) But we must analyze these statistics carefully and compare them with other realities in the Latin American evangelical church. First of all, we must analyze what is the integral projection of the evangelical church in our countries. In light of the Gospels, how are we accomplishing our mission? Being relevant in our social reality is vital. Robinson Cavalcanti, a Brazilian theologian, comments about the evangelical church in Brazil: “The lack of pertinence of Protestantism has come to such a point that if the Rapture would occur today, the Brazilian society would take a week to notice that the believers were no longer there.”¹⁶

On the other hand, Victor Rey warns us,

The numerical growth in the evangelical churches poses certain dangers; perhaps the most obvious is the superficiality. The mega-churches... run the risk of institutionalizing a popular evangelical religiosity.¹⁷

How are we doing as Latin American Nazarenes in respect to our identity in the midst of the mission? Have we faithfully finished living and proclaiming the gospel in our countries? Is the realization of our mission as Wesleyans integrated? How have we influenced the Latin American evangelical church so that they know and live a sanctified life? How do we avoid isolation, on the one hand, and being absorbed without discernment on the other?

DESTINY: OUR UNCONCLUDED TASK

The Latin American evangelical church holds great potential and possibilities for the future but needs to make some adjustments.

Focusing on our destiny as an evangelical church should help us forge our identity by giving us the possibility of integrating our roots as our mission in a vision and action towards the future based on the Gospel. The evangelical identity projected towards the future or destiny will depend on how we confront the challenges in Latin America to preserve and enrich our evangelical mandate. Could it not be that the Latin American Church is facing the challenge to articulate a new evangelical culture rooted as much in the Bible as in our current context? I am not suggesting the concept of culture in a restricted way to create our own ghetto or closed context (sub-culture), but rather to leave it. It is rather an organic or corporate culture, open to exchange with other surrounding cultures (i.e., postmodernism, national cultures, denominational cultures, etc.).¹⁸ It is culture as a lively and dynamic expression of our Latin American evangelical identity in the presence of current and future challenges.

At the same time, Arturo Piedra warns us in *Lo nuevo en la realidad del protestantismo latinoamericano* [The Newest in Latin American Protestantism Reality], that

¹⁵ In the prologue by Norberto Saracco in the book *Raíces teológicas del pentecostalismo* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Creación, 1991), vii.

¹⁶ Cited by Víctor Rey, *Misión y vida en América Latina*, 72. Berg and Pretiz, op.cit., 177, say, “In reality, the proportion of the population represented by evangelicals does not matter as much as the vitality of this proportion.”

¹⁷ Víctor Rey, op. cit., 73.

¹⁸ David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 68.

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It is fundamental to understand the challenges for the church represented by some realities that in the past were not contemplated as clearly considered as now: the influence of evangelical television over its members, the presence of a new group of enthusiastic evangelicals without history, the force of liturgical training and the low profile of Christian discipleship, the economic reduction of the Gospel in the prosperity theologies the uncontrolled desire for the “great” accomplishments in numerical growth and the multi-cultural religious person.¹⁹

It is crucial for the Latin American evangelical church to recognize and understand the religious plurality in society and in its membership. This should drive us to discern between the values and truths that are non-negotiable in our “shared identity” as an evangelical church, and those that are secondary in our identity to be replaced by some of the newer current challenges.

As evangelical Nazarenes, what values and principles are marking our identity and destiny? Where is the Latin American Church of the Nazarene going? What type of adjustments are we making as a church to assure our continuity and relevance of our message and evangelical testimony? In what way are our identity and destiny tied together with the rest of the evangelical Latin American church?

CONCLUSION

First, it appears that the Latin American evangelical church is in its adolescence, because it is suffering an identity crisis. An identity crisis is essentially a theological crisis. This crisis is not only that in general terms we are not “thinking our faith” or that we are not “doing theology”, or even that we are not “practicing our theology”, but that in addition to the failures that we might have in these areas, we must question our theological model. We need a more integrated model, one that emphasizes a more Biblical theology that considers the contributions of all the social sciences and the various denominational traditions. In this manner a Latin American evangelical theology will better help us to rediscover our identity taking into account the context.

Second, and from the Wesleyan-Arminian contribution, the Latin American evangelical identity is without a center without the doctrine and vibrancy of Biblical holiness. The Gospel is a radical call in which God, in His grace, pardons and purifies us to live in holiness, being made every day more in Christ’s image to reflect His love to the world. Evangelical holiness is the integrating element of our identity that gives integrity to all that we are and do as evangelicals. This brings us necessarily to evangelical ethics. Far from being obsolete, our characteristic message is the most relevant message for our times. Humbly, we need to recognize this call to contribute to this evangelical awakening of holiness.

But revival is getting closer, the new reformation that the evangelical church in Latin America needs will be evangelical holiness, but with social and structural repercussions.

¹⁹ See A. Piedra, S. Rooy and H.F. Bullón, *¿Hacia dónde va el protestantismo? Herencia y prospectivas en América Latina* (Buenos Aires:Ed. Kairós, 2003), 21-22.

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Third, our supreme call as the Nazarene evangelical church is to give genuine testimony of the Gospel. John Stott, based on Philippians 1:27-30, appeals to evangelicals that we be faithful to the quintuple call the Gospel exhorts: to be obedient to the call to

- Evangelical wholeness, to live a life worthy of the Gospel.
- Evangelical stability, to be firm in the Gospel.
- Evangelical truth, to contend for the Gospel's faith.
- Evangelical perseverance, to suffer for the Gospel,
- Evangelical unity, to work together for the Gospel.²⁰

Are we ready to recuperate our identity as evangelicals and Nazarenes in Latin America and so contribute to the Latin American evangelical identity? This is our moment in conjunction with the entire evangelical church. What joy it would be that God could use us in the holiness revival that is coming. May the Lord guide us and help us!

²⁰ Stott, op. cit., 135-146.