

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY: WHAT IS AN EVANGELICAL?

(Reaction to the paper by Ramón Sierra)

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As Christians we carry Christ's name in us. Our most remote background is the Israelite nation, with all of its Canaanite, Egyptian, Chaldean, and Persian influences. Christian people saw the light in the midst of the Greco-Latin culture. How curious that God has taken two pagan languages so that through them he could reveal to us first the Old and later the New Testament! So that Christians are the product of God's revelation in the midst of a pagan culture and pagan languages.

The current Christian identity inevitably inherits all that is historically behind it. Therefore, we cannot forget the Hebrew people, the Canaanites, the ancient empires, the Occidental culture, and our American ancestors that received the Europeans as gods or deities. The "Latin American soul" is not homogenous, due to racial and cultural crossings and recrossings. This also influences the current Christian identity.

The arrival of "Christians" in the New World was produced principally by four countries, three of them Catholic (Spain, Portugal and France) and one Protestant (England). This is how Catholic and Protestant currents arrived. As it is well known, the first three predominated from the south of the North American subcontinent to the Tierra del Fuego (southern tip of Argentina), including the main islands in the Caribbean. The other predominated in what are now Canada and the United States (with a few exceptions such as the southern part of the United States and the French in Quebec) and a few islands in the Caribbean.

As Latin Americans we will concentrate more on our reality, tied more to the Iberian countries. Because of this, a short summary will suffice.

Papal and Roman Catholicism denominated from 1492 in Ibero-America. This "Christianity" is not considered authentic by Protestants, and because of this as soon as the Ibero-American countries became independent, they tried to enter with what they called true Christianity to bring the "true gospel".

What eventually became to be the Christian group called "evangelicals" had different stages in its establishment:

First: Arrival of the Bible Societies. "The first agents of the Protestant Bible Societies, from the beginning of the 19th century went throughout... the Latin American countries, now independent or at the juncture of becoming independent, and were the precursors of the Protestant mission" (Prien 1982:709). The success was uneven but it set some foundations for later expansion.

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Second: Foreign Protestant Communities. This also began at the beginning of the 19th century. As Great Britain was the triumphant and emerging power on the world scene, it was the English who established the first Protestant chapel in Rio de Janeiro in 1819, and in 1825 in Buenos Aires (Supra, 717). Later the Germans and others arrived.

Third: English and North American missionaries. The arrival of these was also related to the expansion of the colonial empires. First the British missionaries came, numerous until the end of the First World War; later the North Americans, in accordance to the North American predominance throughout the world. This also had to do with current Christian identity as Hans Jürgen Prien said: “Cotton Mather was one of the first to bring the image of Latin America to the attention of United States Protestantism, as a foundation and point of departure for later missionary efforts in the subcontinent (Ibid, 761). This author also adds:

... the presumptuous vocation arose, manifested by the liberal culture of the United States, generally called the *American dream*: that particular mixture of patriotism and racism the converts the people from the United States in instruments of providence in the diffusion of the *American way of life*, that is fundamentally based on Protestantism. Faith, well-being and progress that the Pilgrim Fathers brought to North America are reciprocally linked in this vision of things. Therefore, it had to appear as an act of loving your neighbor share the blessings of the Protestant faith with the poor neighbors to the south of the Rio Grande (Supra, 761-762).

So our evangelical identity is the result of many historical and ideological essences, not always concordant.

The above brings us to some Biblical expressions about Christian and evangelical identity:

1. According to Acts 26, a Christian is someone who has been touched by Christ, who has gone from the power of Satan to God, believes in the prophets and fervently testifies about Christ (vv.13, 18, 27 and 29).
2. A Christian is someone who is a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17).
3. A Christian is someone that loves God with all of his heart, soul, mind, and strength and loves his neighbor as himself (Matthew 22:37-40; Romans 12:9-11 and 13:1, 8).
4. A Christian is someone that imitates the holiness of the Father, is a member of the holy nation and is a propagator of the light of Christ (1 Peter 1:15-17; 2:9).
5. Christ used two metaphors: Salt and Light (Matthew 13-16). A Christian is someone who seasons and illuminates society. I believe that Latin American evangelical Christianity is very deficient in seasoning and giving light to society. The percentages of Evangelicals grow every day, but it is difficult to perceive their healing influence (see the reference to Robinson Cavalcanti in Ramon Sierra's paper).

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As part of the evangelical Christian identity one cannot miss the **Apostles' Creed**, which is the symbol of a true ecumenicalism, without forgetting the Nicene and Calcedonian creeds and reaffirming the truths of the Reformation: Only grace, only faith, only the Bible and the Universal priesthood of all believers. And of course, as Nazarenes and heirs of “fiery Arminianism”, we see what the identity of our “Methodist grandfathers” was according to Wesley:

A Methodist is one who loves the Lord his God with all his heart, with all his mind, and with all his strength....He is therefore happy in God...in everything giveth thanks...he ‘prays without ceasing’...and loving God he ‘loves his neighbor as himself’...For he is ‘pure in heart’...the one design of his life; namely, ‘to do, not his own will, but the will of Him that sent him’...he has in all points ‘a conscience void of offence towards God, and towards man’...All the commandments of God he accordingly keeps, and that with all his might; for his obedience is in proportion to his love, the source from whence it flows...whatsoever he doeth, it is all to the glory of God...nor do the customs of the world at all hinder his ‘running the race which is set before him’(Wesley, *Works*, XI:371-2).

Writing to John Bennet, Wesley says: “If the Bible is true, then no one is a Christian if he does not carry the marks of Christians in them. One of these is the **love of God**, which if is in the soul, should be felt as fire over the body. Another is **the testimony of the Spirit of God...that I am a child of God**” (González 1998, Tomo XIII:163, emphasis added).

The evangelical Christian is someone who waits on God. “Yes, Lord, walking in the way of your laws, we wait for you; your name and renown are the desire of our hearts” (Isaiah 26:8). The evangelical Christian projects and looks for fruit now and in the future: “In days to come Jacob will take root, Israel will bud and blossom and fill all the world with fruit...and this will be the full fruitage of the removal of his sin; when...no Asherah poles or incense altars will be left standing” (Isaiah 27:6, 9). When will idolatry end, that is so abhorrent to God?

The danger of losing the evangelical Christian identity is real. Adding to what has been quoted by Sierra, Arturo Piedra joins with what I also feel: “Even more important than the aspects that have been mentioned is **the tendency to dilute the person of Jesus Christ and his redeeming work** through the absorption of ‘mentalist’ currents” (2003:22, emphasis added). This and other dangers are now cause for concern, so that we must turn our attention to Christ, to be like Him.

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