

TEACHING IN A CROSS-CULTURAL SETTING: South America Region

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Introduction

Initially we must begin by saying that teaching the truths of God in other cultures has been a constant challenge for the Christian church from its beginnings. From Palestine to Asia, Europe and then to the whole world, the message of the Gospel has always had a missional character. Samuel Escobar, a distinguished Latin American theologian, emphasized this when he wrote, “there is something that makes the Christian message move and go from one culture to another. It’s fundamental character is that possibility of being translated, “it’s translatability”¹. It is a message that is “translatable”, and because of that the Christian message has been presented in an incredible variety of cultures.

The Missiological Approach: Latin American Perspectives

The fulfillment of the mission has always needed to be realized in a context with specific socioeconomic, political and religious characteristics. Biblically we understand that the mission of the church is carried out in the power of the Spirit and has as its distinctive character in the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ, but this does not make it exempt from the influence of the context where such mission is carried out.

Theological education is not exempt from this challenge. For this reason, the topic of teaching theology is even more complex when it is realized in a culture that is different from the professor's. In these cases, not only does the professor have to deal with the educational challenges characteristic of any teaching task but to these there is added the new missiological challenges of ministering in a context that is different to his or her own.

The Cross-cultural Professor: Tricultural Model of Communication

What does it imply to be a cross-cultural professor? The challenge of the Christian mission is not just to cross geographic boundaries. In our generation the problem is not to transport persons (in this sense the technology and scientific advances have helped us a lot in the last decades), the great frontier continues being the culture. The process of communication of the Gospel can isolate itself from the human culture from which it proceeds, nor of the culture in which it will be proclaimed.²

Eugenio Nida³, from the American Bible Society, has proposed a simple but useful graphic representation, which he has called the Tricultural Model of the Missionary Communication. This communication involves an interaction between three distinct cultures: the biblical-theological culture, the culture of the communicator and the recipient or student's culture.

As the carrier of the message, the cross-cultural teacher finds him or herself in an intermediate ground and looks in two directions. In first place, he or she looks at Scripture and Theology and needs to realize that there exists an historic vacuum that separates him or her from the message and the context in which they were originated. But in second place, the professor must also look toward the field of missions and finds him or herself in a culture that is different from his or her

own, not only because there is a different language but due to other characteristics in the economic, social, religious, racial realm, among others.

In relation to our gathering, this implies understanding the reality of Latin America as the recipient culture of your theological teaching. Obviously, to pretend to make a description of the reality of Latin America can easily become an endless task. We have so much diversity that any effort to synthesize will easily be overwhelmed by a reality that is very culturally complex and rich.

I do not try to make a presentation of the details that make up a profile of our cultures, because I consider that if you are going to minister in Latin America you need to know fundamentally the general reality of this region and identify missionologically, the situation of the church in this context.

Latin American Identity: Our Multicultural Heritage

What does it mean to be Latin American today? This is not merely a geographic concept; being Latin American has to do with an eminently cultural concept. While one language predominates the cultural variants are diverse. To affirm that Latin America is strictly Spanish or totally indigenous is to fall in a dangerous reductionism of our varied heritage. On this continent, diverse backgrounds gather from the north, east and south of Europe, from Africa and the Middle East, and they are united and mixed together with local indigenous roots. Eldrenkamp has said it well, “we live in our own flesh the encounter and disencounter of various races and cultures.”⁴ Canclini, an Argentine pastor, has summed up our different heritages using the typology of different metals: we are bronze (indigenous root), silver (Spanish descent), ebony (African

influence), and the mixture that results is an “alienation” that could be made of “gold or of mud.”⁵

The Present Latin American Reality

Many of the indicators that follow are present in other regions of the world, with maybe some variants. This is understood because we live in the midst of a world society that is globalized, and as such has standardized life styles. Nevertheless, this continent still holds on to its peculiarities, which must be taken into consideration to fulfill the mission God has given.

A Society of Contrasts

The last three decades in Latin America have been inundated with many changes, which have been determinate in its life and development. Struggling democracies, new economic models, increase in unemployment and subemployment figures, growth of the informal sector of our economies, worsening of the demographic problem, the appearance of new social actors and the crisis of the traditional political discourse, are but some of the elements that compose this new reality. Ethnically but also generally, Latin America is notably a very heterogeneous and complex reality.

Just to mention a specific case, a notable contrast is seen in the co-existence of rural and urban societies. What common grounds does a predominately rural community like El Puyo in Ecuador have with mega-metropolitan city of Sao Paulo or Buenos Aires? An important sociological phenomenon which helps to understand the Latin American reality of the past fifty years has been the urbanization. The constant migration from the rural areas to the large cities, from the interior to the urban centers which is motivated by the models of development, has surpassed all

of the capacities of the State and has brought with it a series of social problems. A Latin American missionologist, has mentioned that “one of the most critical phenomenon in the urban jungles is the precarious conditions of the children and adolescents, victims of the disintegration of the family, seedbeds of delinquency.”⁶

The social polarization that has defined Latin America for centuries has been accentuated these past years. The social differences have shot in contrary directions and is more evident in the social co-existence of the extremely opulent and rich with those that live in extreme poverty or misery.

In this situation, Christian compassion has become an indispensable element for the development of the mission of the Church. Positively, this has generated, from the evangelical perspective, the realization of a series of projects that reflect a holistic mission perspective. This social need is urgent, but, on the other hand, this reality has fostered a favorable environment for the propagation of “Prosperity Theologies”, that based on this urgent need and the consumerism addiction of today’s generation, offer a partial gospel that has been adjusted more to contemporary individualistic expectations that the demands of the Kingdom. The question that naturally arises is: “How can we coherently teach the principles of the Kingdom?”

The differences between the Caribbean influence of Venezuela, the indigenous presence in the Andean area of Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia and the predominance of European cultures in the Southern Cone of South America, have been evident in our models of pastoral care, of the mission, of our leadership, and of worship.

The Influence of the Postmodern Culture

Without a doubt we are living as a world in a time of transition that is evidenced by changing paradigms. Postmodernity is an emerging paradigm that offers a new interpretative proposal of reality. Yet, Latin America is not a strictly postmodern society. On this continent one can find rural societies that are still pre-modern. They aspire that the awaited modernity will bring solutions to their problems. Along with this are other social sectors that are fully involved in the process of modernity, while others in the urban societies have already begin to show signs of postmodernity.

The postmodern philosophy affirms that the world does not have one single meaning and that all of reality is subject to multiple readings or interpretations, which each by themselves have the same degree of validity. The search for one organizing truth is questioned and so is absolute truth. Terranova has said: “In the postmodern society everything is relative and there is no place nor time for that which requires the will and commitment. It is the era of the feelings: ‘nothing is true nor a lie’, everything is diluted.”⁷

In the past Christian experience has been defined in doctrinal terms, that is in the conversion to Jesus Christ and the acceptance of certain biblical truths. Now the emphasis is on the spiritual experience itself, and as a means to feel good.⁸ The faith that is articulated with the aid of reason has given way to the supervalorization of sensibility and emotionalism, which have been constitutes into legitimate categories, supposedly religious experiences. However, one does not reach God by way of the intellect exclusively or by way of unaided emotions. To know God implies assuming disciplines for life that affect all of the areas of the human person. Such a relationship is only made effective through the faith that comes through “hearing the Word” (Rom. 10:17). For the sociologist Juan González, what predominates is “the light religion: a type of religiosity characterized by an absence of dramatism, its incoherent doctrine, its tacit asystematic spirit (the believes are not translated necessarily into norms for personal conduct and

its rites do not demand institutional support), and its declarations of independence related to personal and ethical commitments.”⁹

Presuppositions such as these become challenges for the Latin American church and its mission. As Christians Latinos affirm that truth has a center: Jesus Christ, and therefore because that truth became a human person, we have criteria to evaluate other truths.

The educational proposals in general make the educational process a period of professional or work training with clearly defined objectives that should be reached in preestablished period of time. Yet, scripturally speaking, ministerial preparation is formative. It is distinguished from other educational proposals because of various fundamental reasons. In *first place*, it is a process that centers its interest in the integral or holistic formation of the person and not merely in training/enabling to carry out certain tasks. For Jesus, in the process of formation, all areas of the lives of the disciples were included. In *second place*, it is a process that is not limited to a certain moment in time but one that should accompany the learner for all of life for his or her formation. In *third place*, under these conditions, the educational period of ministerial education in theological institutions is not a finished stage in the life of the person but only a period of initiation and readiness for ministerial development for all of life.

Religious Pluralism

Beginning with the arrival of Columbus, a little over five decades ago, the religious panorama has been composed historically by three separate groups. First a majority of nominal Roman Catholics, secondly, an evangelical minority represented mostly by an Anglo-Saxon Protestantism and, thirdly, the indigenous religions that are in route of extinction. This panorama has also suffered some very significant changes during the last years. The phenomenon of

globalization and the arrival of the postmodern culture have become manifest in an opening up to the sacred that is made evident in a growing religious pluralism.

This religious pluralism should not be understood as a passing phenomenon but as a growing reality. At the present, and without major conflict, there co-exist peacefully in Latin America multiple religious expressions that come from a reemergence of the indigenous religiosity, oriental religions, and afro-Brazilian spiritualism up to the New Age Movement.

Religious pluralism has rapidly become a challenge to the Christian mission in Latin America. Escobar has commented: “Now-a-days the missionaries and evangelists (and professors) are obligated to reconsider the New Testament teaching about religiosity and also of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Technology and the techniques of communication, as well as an intellectually reasonable faith are no longer sufficient. Spiritual power and disciples such as prayer, biblical meditation and fasting are necessary for missionaries to cross new frontiers.”¹⁰

The Growth of the Latin American Evangelical Movement

At the present Latin American life transpires impelled by a dynamic that could be described with the categories of *overflow* and of continual *informality*. The formal institutions of our societies have been ‘falling short’ before the demographic explosion, the accelerated modernity and the ideological confusion, and alongside of these there have appeared a world of informality.¹¹ This mark of the Latin American societies has also had its counterpart in the bosom of the evangelical churches. More and more there has been a proliferation of the appearance of also informal congregations usually independent in style or neo-Pentecostal churches, with great vitality and explosive growth, but without a history or tradition.

Suddenly the growth of the evangelical Latin American movement has surpassed all kinds of analysis and projections.¹² Mega-churches have arisen that rent out theaters. New models of services and worship have been developed. Different pastoral leadership styles have been promoted. And there have been introduced in the life of the evangelical church new doctrinal emphases under the pretense that they are contemporary manifestations of the Spirit.

In August of 1996, in Costa Rica a congress was carried out with the theme: “Let Us Reaffirm Our Faith” convened by the International Institute of Evangelization a Fondo (IINDEF), pastors, superintendents, presidents and professors of seminaries, and other Christian leaders. Among some of the elements of the Situational diagnosis of the Latin American evangelical church that was the starting point of this gathering, the following issues were predominant:

1. Concern for the theologies of wide propagation by the massive means of communication such as, the Theology of Prosperity, the Super Faith, Holy Laughter, the Theocratic Movement and the positive confession.
2. The establishment of certain “spiritual laws” to which God himself is subject.
3. An overemphasis in a modality like “spiritual warfare” that is promoted as if it were a science since it is presupposed that the laws of the spiritual world are unveiled and in this way, making use of these laws and pre-established procedures one can put under control the spiritual realm.
4. Teachings that are strange to the Gospel like the so called “generational curses”, the creative power of the human word, the use of salt, blood and oil to apply to houses and

temples, the receiving of divine favors conditioned by the giving of offerings, among others.

5. The substitution of the authority of the Sacred Scriptures by special teachings, prophecies, revelations, experiences and particular leaders.
6. The development of an attractive popular religiosity, but that is syncretistic and disconnected with the principles of the Kingdom of God as a life style.[13](#)

At the margin value judgments that can be elaborated in relation to the explosive growth and its deviations in the Latin American church, two preliminary observations are true:

- a. This movement has permeated all of the Latin American church. That is why some analysts of the evangelical reality have called it “the pentecostalization of the church.”[14](#)
- b. Before this growth, that is accompanied by supposedly new manifestations of the Spirit, two reactions have predominated: on one hand, some denominations have totally opened up the doors of their congregations assuming that everything that is “new” should be good and come from God, others have closed down their doors and rejected all type of influence without giving any explanation and under the risk of losing many of their members. What is of concern is that in both reactions the common denominator has been the lack of adequate biblical-theological criteria to analyze the contemporary doctrinal proposals. What is the role of the theological educators in midst of this situation?

Conclusions

The ideas above provide the specific context where we have to put into action our task as theological educators. What a challenge! Therefore, what does it mean to teach theology in a context such as the one in Latin America?

Value of the Cultural Latin American Elements

Our diversity enriches us instead of pretending to uniform us, and it forms our identity as Latin-Americans. Interestingly, for educators like Piaget and Kohlberg the heterogeneous environment influences the possibility of cognitive and moral development, but for that to take place, one's active participation is necessary in that complex reality. In theological education, the professor that participates in this educational experience will be forced to adapt to the various contexts and learn to value the different cultural elements of the Latin-American reality.

Recognize That the Educational Act Is a Point of Encounter and of Mutual Growth

Teaching in Latin America implies valuing our roots, but at the same time it is recognizing beyond our individualities and cultural expressions that the purpose of God is to bring together every person, culture, tongue and nation into a new humanity in Christ. From this perspective, the educational act could become a point not only of encounter but also of mutual growth.

Relate Knowledge With Life Experience

Our pedagogy has principally had an intellectualistic emphasis, but it is necessary to recognize that in ministerial education one needs to relate knowledge more to the experience of life. It is

urgent to reorganize our study programs in such a way that it includes a space for the development of the Christian virtues in the character of the minister.

Clarify Our Doctrinal Definitions to Reaffirm Our Identity

The overwhelming growth of the Latin-American church separated from solid biblical and theological instruction easily can be prey of confusion and the losing of our identity. Because of this, in the midst of this new panorama, the task of theological education becomes a key element in order to maintain the health of the church.

Understand Some Basic Cultural Elements

As it has been said, it is very difficult to culturally uniform South America; yet, there exists some cultural elements that are worth mentioning here:

- **Our sense of community.** For us it is very important to feel a part of the social community. The majority of the persons do not open up completely right away in any social group except only in a selected circle of close friends. In this direction, the family, and times of rest like holidays are aspects that are highly valued.
- **The use of time.** Situations are prioritized over commitments. For example, talking with someone could easily justify being late to an appointment.
- **Humor.** All of the situations of life are good to laugh at, even tragedies. Irony, double meaning, imitation and sarcasm are commonly used modalities in Latin humor.

- **Treating others.** Usually our initial treatment of others is formal, especially when we talk to older or elderly persons or when one is beginning an interpersonal relationship with anyone. In the case of theological education how persons are treated depends on their culture, but in most cases professors are addressed as “usted” which is the formal “you” in Spanish or as “pastor”: as an expression of respect. Rarely are academic titles used to address anybody.
- **Friendship and affection.** Hugs and kisses for greeting each other are appropriate and expected obviously some interesting variants are used according to the area of Latin America you are visiting. The Latin person likes to establish profound and lasting friendship that at times are sealed with a compadre or godfather relationship. Greeting the same person various times in the same day is not a problem

Latin America is a reality full of ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, and religious contrasts, but at the same time is a young continent full of potentialities, resources and opportunities. It is a region that is experiencing great growth in the evangelical church in general. However, at the same time it is seriously threatened by the infiltration of doctrines that are foreign to the Gospel message. In conclusion it is a white field, ready for harvest, with great hunger for God, a fertile ground for the fulfillment of the mission of God in these times. It is a continent that is ready to receive, but also to share.

As I finish this essay we must remember that biblically we do not have a better cross-cultural example but Christ himself. The Willobank Report about “The Gospel and culture” has affirmed that the incarnation was “the most spectacular instance of cultural identification of all of humanity¹⁵ because Jesus Christ leaving behind his home effectively entered the world. He emptied himself of his glory and came to serve us. John Stott making reference to Jesus’ model

has said that he “adopted our nature, he lived our life, supported our temptations, experimented our sufferings, felt our pain, took upon himself our sins and died our death.”¹⁶

The Word of God in Hebrews 2:17 shows us the example of our Lord Jesus Christ who is worthy to follow in the fulfillment of our ministerial task: “...*he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every aspect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God*”. The incarnation of Jesus is not only a theoretical proposal but also the model the church should follow in the fulfillment of its mission. He himself said: “*As the father has sent me, I am also sending you*” (John 20:21).

Endnotes

¹ Samuel Escobar, **Postmodernidad y la Iglesia Evangélica** (*Postmodernism and the Evangelical Church*). (San Jose: IINDEF, 2000).

² “El Evangelio y la cultura” (“The Gospel and Culture”), **En El Movimiento de Lausana al servicio del Reino**. (In *The Lausana Movement at the Service of the Kingdom*). (San Jose: Varitec, 1992). p. 71.

³ Eugene A. Nida. **Message and Mission: The Communication of the Christian Faith** (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), pp. 33-61.

⁴ Rut Eldrenkamp. **Identidad cultural latinoamericana** (*Latin American Cultural Identity*) Congreso Latinoamericano de Evangelización CLADE IV (Latin American Congress of Evangelization CLADE IV). (Quito: Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana (Latin American Theological Fraternity), 1993). p. 326.

- 5 Anoldo Canclini. **Tras el alma de América Latina** (Behind the Soul of Latin America). (Editorial Mundo Hispano. El Paso, Texas), 1992
- 6 Samuel Escobar. “Entender a la América Latina en el nuevo milenio” (“Understanding Latin America in the New Milenium”). En **Apuntes Pastorales** (*Pastoral Notes*), Volumen XVII, Número 2 (Costa Rica: Desarrollo Cristiano Internacional, octubre, de 1999). p. 13.
- 7 Juan Terranova. “La iglesia frente a la cultura posmoderna” (“The Church Before the Postmodern Culture”). In **Apuntes Pastorales** (*Pastoral Notes*), Volumen XVII, Numero 2 (Costa Rica: Desarrollo Cristiano Internacional, octubre de 1999). P. 46.
- 8 René Padilla. “De cara al Cuarto Congreso de Evangelización (CLADE IV)” (“Face to Face to the Forth Evangelism Congress”). In **Iglesia y mission R.I.O.C.** (*Church and mission*). Vol. 18 N° 67/68 (Buenos Aires: FTL, enero-julio 1999). p. 31.
- 9 Luis González Carbajal. “Educar en un mundo posmoderno) (Educating In a Postmodern World”). In **Educadores** (*Educators*), (Madrid: 1992). P. 246.
- 10 Samuel Escobar. “Entender a la América Latina en el nuevo milenio” (“Understanding Latin America in the New Milenium). Op. cit., p. 16.
- 11 Samuel Escobar. **Postmodernidad y la iglesia evangélica** (*Postmodernism and the Evangelical Church*). Op. cit., pp. 20-21.

[12](#) David Stoll. **Is Latin America turning protestant?** (California: University of California Press, 1990).

[13](#) These points were taken from the Manifestación de la Comisión Directora de la Consulta Reafirmemos la fe (Manifestation of the Directive Commission of Conference on Reaffirming our Faith). Boletín N° 9, (San José: IINDEF, 1996)

[14](#) Cf. Bernardo Campos **De la reforma protestante a la pentecostalidad de la iglesia. Debate sobre el Pentecostalismo en América Latina** (From the Protestant Reform to the Pentecostalization of the Church). (Quito: CLAL, 1997).

[15](#) **El Movimiento de Lausana al servicio del Reino** (*The Lausana Movement at the Service of the Kingdom*). Op. Cit. p. 92.

[16](#) John Stott. **El cristiano contemporáneo** (*The Contemporary Christian*). (Buenos Aires/Grand Rapids: Nueva Creación/Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995). p. 342