

CHRIST AS THE PARADIGM FOR MISSION:
REFLECTIONS FROM LATIN AMERICA

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The history of Christian mission is intimately linked to the person and work of Jesus Christ. He is the one who holds our faith together and the best missionary God has ever sent. His life and ministry were filled with elements that marked His missionary model; for that reason, He is our paradigm for mission, the one we need to follow.

Jesus' missionary model is linked intimately with the definition of his person. That is, there is an inseparable link between his *identity* (who Jesus is) and his *mission* (how he came to this world and why).

The three Synoptic Gospels record that day in Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asked his disciples the key question about His person, in the following terms: "Who do people say that I am?" And then he probed their hearts more deeply with the second pointed question: "... And you, who do you say that I am?" (Mat.16: 13-17).

Peter's spontaneous response was well received (vs. 16-17), but in the following passage (Matt 16: 21-25), after Jesus announced his own death, the apostle tried to persuade Him to resign or escape his redemptive mission: The Lord had to confront Peter. What does the way Peter was thinking tell us? In the years of Jesus' public ministry, people's expectations regarding His mission were opposed to the divine purpose. While the Jews waited for a Messiah to liberate them politically from the Roman yoke (which was not going to be possible if the Messiah had to suffer and die), Jesus' proposal was to free them from even greater slavery. It was a contrast of expectations between temporal and eternal issues, between material and spiritual things.

In our days, there are still contradictions with regard to interpretative differences and individualistic expectations about the person of Jesus and his mission. In our generation, our

image of Christ is reduced by the requirements and demands of his followers. However, as Bedford and Segura stated in the Fifth Latin American Congress of Evangelization:

Jesus is not just one more offer for consumers. He rises up like the Sovereign Christ who demands loyalty, fidelity, even if the path seems adverse and disconcerting. It is precisely because, with his life, death and resurrection, there is newness, strength, divergence, contrast and the assurance that He is the Christ, that he manages to question profoundly our most restricted utopias and hopes.¹

Therefore, answering the question about who Jesus is, is an existential and inescapable need in every disciple of Christ's life, because it links us with His model of mission. He is a Christ whose radical demands require us to make definitions and his questions pierce us in our search for faithful answers to his message and his mandate.

Theological basis for a Christological Paradigm of Mission

In studying the life and ministry of Jesus we find three theological key moments to chart a way forward in our missiology: His incarnation, His crucifixion and death, and His resurrection. Obviously, these are not the only options we could use to establish some guidelines to help us to search for a Christological model of mission; for instance, Bosch has proposed four salient aspects of Jesus' ministry to help us to understand the missionary power behind the Person and work of the Lord.²

Likewise, in order to contextualize our reflection on the search of these missiological guidelines, we will try to make a contrast between these three key theological elements in the life of the Lord and some images of Christ which are present in the religious scene of Latin America.

¹ Nancy Bedford y Harold Segura. *CLADE V. Sigamos a Jesús en su Reino de vida*. Buenos Aires. Editorial Kairós, 2011. p. 40.

² David Bosch has raised these four outstanding aspects of the person and ministry of Jesus to consider in a Christological model of mission: *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, *Jesus and the Law*, *Jesus and his disciples*, and *the mission from the perspective of Easter*. (Misión en Transformación. Cambios de Paradigma en a teología de la misión. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Libros Desafío, 1991. p. 50-63).

In the history of Hispanic America, some images of Christ were presented which had little to do with his theological nature and missionary model.³ With the Conquest of America, more than 500 years ago, Christ also came to our continent as can be seen in art, literature and religion. John Mackay, British theologian and missionary, in his fundamental book: "*The Other Spanish Christ*" describes the *Criollo* Christ who came to America in the following terms:

The first thing that comes to our attention in the *Criollo* Christ is his lack of humanity. As for his earthly life, he appears almost exclusively in two dramatic roles: that of a child in the arms of his mother and that of a painful and bleeding victim. It is the picture of a Christ who was born and died, but who never lived.⁴

These partial images of Christ on our continent have been forged, more as a product of ignorance and the influence of tradition, than of an encounter with the person of Jesus Christ. They have been metaphors installed in the thought and religious imagination of the people, but they are far removed from the biblical model.

The Incarnation of Jesus: God became like us.

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us..." (John 1:14).

Jesus' incarnation is not only a theological topic to understand but also a historical reality that marked a mission model that we should imitate. The best-known verse of Scripture makes mention of this profound truth that changed the history of mankind: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son..." (John 3:16). Jesus became human out of love for us, but he was also historically and culturally located; He was a Jew of the first century and was inserted in the structural and social realities of his time.

One of the outstanding aspects of the incarnational model leads us to reflect that the Lord's public ministry style was focused on the most vulnerable of his generation or the less

³ Samuel Escobar has an excellent work entitled: *In Search of Christ in Latin America*, where he chronologically traces the itinerary of Christology in Latin America.

⁴ Juan Mackay. *El Otro Cristo Español*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones la Aurora, 1988. p. 128.

avored of the sectors of society. According to several authors, in their analysis of the New Testament,⁵ children, women, Samaritans, the poor, the publicans and the marginalized, were the protagonists of Jesus' mission. Probably this approach was one of the most discordant points with the religious norms of his time, but it is a significant mark that we must take into account, because if we are going to fulfill the mission in coherence with the Gospel of Jesus, we too are called to serve those who already suffer and are in need in our context.

How many possibilities we have in Latin America around this missiological model! Our continent is a mission field full of contrasts and an emerging social reality marked by discouraging social indicators, waiting for a transforming message.

Another of the distinctive elements derived from the theological basis of Jesus' incarnation is the scope of his mission and the content of his message. Its scope is universal, inclusive and crosses all kinds of social, geographical, racial barriers, etc. leaving aside any ethnocentrism or prejudice of any kind. On the other hand, the content of Jesus Christ's message is of hope and justice framed in the proclamation of the Kingdom. *A message of hope* for those who expected the salvation that was to come and a *message of justice* for the vulnerable and weak.

Jesus' message is an invitation to conversion that implies a radical change in obedience and commitment to the demands of the Gospel.

In Hispanic America one of the stereotypes of Christ that does not fully honor the theological dimension of the Incarnation, has been the figure of the baby Christ, resting peacefully in his mother's arms, brought to us by the Spaniards. His absolute dependence on

⁵ See Senior y Stuhlmueller en *Biblia y Misión: fundamentos bíblicos de la misión*. Verbo Divino, Estella, 1985; David Bosch. *Misión en Transformación*. Libros Desafío, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000. Joseph Fitzmeyer. *El Evangelio según San Lucas: Introducción general*. Cristiandad, Madrid, 1986.

maternal care is a limitation. How can he understand us if he himself needs to be cared for even in the most basic matters for survival?

As a baby, he is so young and tender and does not understand adult life, and can only be accessed through the intercession of his mother Mary. This popular Christology has deepened the veneration and worship of the Virgin Mary as an intercessor of the church in many countries of the continent.

This transforming message of the Incarnate Jesus shows that God's purpose is to create under this new humanity in Jesus Christ and in the power of the Spirit, a community that embodies the values of the Kingdom and witnesses to the world.

In Jesus Christ, the Kingdom of God has broken into history, therefore, it is both a present reality and a promise that has to be fulfilled. As the church of the Lord we live in that rhythm of active waiting between the inauguration and the full manifestation of the Kingdom, and we are called to be an agent of transformation in society.

The Crucifixion and death of Jesus: The sacrifice as supreme evidence of love

*“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this:
While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).*

Article VI of the Church of the Nazarene on the Atonement clearly defines what Jesus did for us when it states: “We believe that Jesus Christ, by His sufferings, by the shedding of His own blood, and by His death on the Cross, made a full atonement for all human sin...”⁶ The crucifixion is one of the distinctive elements of Christian theology because we have inherited the teaching that through his vicarious sacrifice on the cross, the Lord paid a high price to redeem us by fulfilling the prophecy of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53.

⁶ *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene*, 2013-2017. p. 28

“The cross is the central and culminating point of faith in the New Testament,”⁷ and challenges our status quo. A question that cannot be postponed for us is, what is the place of the cross in our contemporary mission models? Unlike today where the cross can occupy a decorative role, an ornament without major threat, in the first century, the cross was synonymous with shame, suffering and death. The challenge of Jesus through his death on the cross is also a call to a sacrificial and humble life in service to others.

Stott has commented that there is a marked contrast between the world and the cross that becomes evident between selfish ambition and sacrifice, between power and service, and between comfort and suffering.⁸ Referring to the selfish request of James and John, who were profiteers and seekers of privileged places, thirsty for honor and prestige, this author points out:

All this mentality is incompatible with the way of the cross. "The Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life ..." He renounced the power and glory of heaven and humbled himself to become a slave. He gave himself without reserve and without fear, to the despised and neglected people of the community ... To elevate them he was willing to bear even the shame of the cross. Now he calls us to follow him, not in search of great things for ourselves, but to seek first God's Kingdom and God's justice.⁹

The demands of the cross of Christ are directly related to the radical call of Christian discipleship because sacrifice, service and suffering are difficult words to assimilate and accept in our days. Tozer has written that "God offers life, but not an improved life. The life he offers is new life that is born of death. It is a life that is possible only from the other side of the cross. Whoever wants to possess it has to go through the cross ..." ¹⁰

⁷ W.T. Purkiser. *Explorando nuestra fe cristiana*. Kansas City: Casa Nazarena de Publicaciones, 1979. p.187

⁸ John Stott. *La cruz de Cristo*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Certeza, 1996. p. 317-319.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 317

¹⁰ A.W. Tozer. *La cruz total*. Buenos Aires. Editorial Alianza, 2010. p. 77

The challenges of discipleship confront us and determine the model of mission to follow when facing the world's parameters. Stam, has pointed out that:

Christian discipleship is totally different. As Bonhoeffer mentioned, it's grace, but not 'cheap grace'. It offers everything, and demands everything. "You have received grace, give freely" and give everything. It is true that the disciples discussed among themselves who was the greatest, but with that they contradicted their character as disciples of the Servant ... The greatest is the one who is the humblest. Jesus does not say: 'take my traditions and pass them on', but 'take my cross and follow me.'¹¹

This second theological axis in the construction of a mission model can be contrasted with another more contemporary figure about Christ in Latin America, derived by the Theologies of Prosperity, which refers to a materialistic Christ, who especially provides blessings to those who believe in Him. This is a Christ who stripped of his Sovereignty and Lordship becomes a facilitator of favors and gifts in response to the consumerist expectation of his followers. He is a Christ of miracles but not for the purpose of giving glory to God but of satisfying the immediate needs of those who seek him.

Unlike the biblical Christ, this Christ does not demand total surrender but rather provides material blessing; he does not demand a radical commitment but rather 'must' respond to the demands of his followers. A non-believing Argentine journalist who published a critical study of contemporary evangelical churches, in his prologue mentions this erroneous metaphor of the materialistic Christ in the following ironic description:

Evangelicals, pastors and churches in general offer a plain, non-theological Christ, something basic, something elementary, operable, simple, accessible, comfortable, a *fast* Christ, like a gondola, within the touch of a hand and who can be reached after a quick spiritual double click. The *easy* evangelical Christ does not demand the contortions of Judeo-Christian repentance, nor the tears of permanent sin and guilt because this Christ repairs your material life, a Christ who from the TV screen heals you, saves you and also pays you the expenses ... " (Seselovski, Bs. As., 2005).

In the midst of the postmodern times we live, in which the Gospel tends to be diluted

¹¹ Juan Stam. *Haciendo teología en América Latina*. San José, Costa Rica: Editorial SEBILA, 2006. p. 215

and people's expectations are to seek to accommodate the message to their own interests, we need to fulfill the mission of God, taking up the cross and preaching the cost of discipleship to follow Jesus.

The Resurrection of Jesus: hope in Christ in face of a world in despair

“For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord...” (2 Corinthians 4:5)

The theological axis of the Resurrection of Jesus is another key milestone for the configuration of a Christological model of mission. In referring to this event in the life of the Lord, Wesleyan theologians have written:

The Resurrection becomes ‘an article of faith’ in the development of the New Testament idea. Salvation depends on verbal confession that ‘Jesus is the Lord’ and believing in the heart that "God raised him from the dead" (Ro.10: 9, see Ga. 1:1, Eph. 1: 20; Col. 2:12; 1 Thess 1: 9-10; 2 Ti. 2: 8; 1 P. 1:21). His resurrection becomes ‘the living center’ of the Christian faith.¹²

The relevant aspect of this theological axis is that a mission model based on Jesus needs to be focused on the Lordship of a Triumphant Christ that neither the cross nor the tomb could stop; He definitely defeated sin, Satan and death; and because he did, he lives and reigns forever.

Bosch has commented that, “in New Testament terms, the exaltation of Jesus is the sign of the victory that Jesus has already obtained over the evil one. Mission means the proclamation and manifestation of the Kingdom of Jesus, a kingdom that includes everything, which has not yet been recognized or accepted by all, but which is already a reality.”¹³

¹² W.T. Purkiser, Richard S. Taylor y Willard H. Taylor. *Dios, hombre y salvación. Una teología bíblica*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, s.f. p. 378.

¹³ David Bosch. *Ibid*, p. 61.

The evangelist Matthew clearly states that the affirmation of the Lordship of the Risen Christ precedes his sending his disciples to the Great Commission: “All authority is given to me in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations ...” (Matthew 28: 18-20). Fulfilling the mission implies having the certainty of knowing that we do it in the name of the Almighty Lord of the Universe, and that the only way to fulfill it fully is to be invested with power from on high, according to what He promised (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8).

Unlike this triumphant Christ, another Christological portrait in our Hispanic America is that of the Christ who stays in Good Friday; he is the Christ of the cross, he is the Christ of the crucifix. This is an image of a suffering Christ, famished, inert, agonizing, lacerated by his wounds, struggling between life and death and that instead of inspiring adoration, surrender and hope awakens pity, sadness and commiseration.

This image of the triumphant Christ, in general, has not aroused interest among the Hispanic populations of our Americas because they “have not known another Christ, except that which they must pity and sponsor, as they would with a child, or with a victim who suffers or around a dead person; but not with the Christ of the Gospels, who refused to receive the patronage of tears even as he was on his way to Golgotha.”¹⁴

As believers, although we understand the extreme sacrifice of Christ displayed on Good Friday, we believe that Scripture teaches us that the passage of the cross was not the final point but the prelude to his definitive victory on Easter Sunday; that transition from Calvary to the empty tomb is fundamental to the understanding of his mission. Stam says: "His death was not a tragedy, it was **the** road to victory to enter glory."¹⁵

The cross is empty and the final portrait of the Bible is that of a Resurrected and Living Jesus, Triumphant and Victorious, Sovereign and King. That biblical image shows us

¹⁴ Juan Mackay. *Ibid*, p. 129.

¹⁵ Juan Stam. *Ibid*, p. 209.

that He is the Lord of all, worthy of all worship and that He makes ethical demands on His People today.

This Risen Christ has words of living hope in the midst of any human situation (1 P. 1: 3). Because He entered the world, died, overcame and rose again, we have hope. His message is relevant, current and optimistic in a needy world, that wanders aimlessly without knowing where they are going.

Conclusions

The Scripture reveals that Jesus is the model of mission we must follow. The early church understood that the heart of the mission was Christ and His message, as evidenced by the entire New Testament. The evangelical mission is Christ-centered by nature and it needs to be made effective through the power of the Spirit (Acts 1:8, 1 Thess. 1:5).

These three theological key moments in the Person and Ministry of Jesus, establish a missiological model to follow. The Incarnation teaches us his identification with humanity especially, with the most dispossessed of the world, the Crucifixion and Death reveal to us the cost and the radical demands of following Jesus, and the Resurrection presents us with the message of hope based on a Living and Victorious Christ, worthy of being adored and proclaimed to all nations.

Although Latin America is nominally a Christian continent, Christ is still unknown by many, because he has been interpreted in the light of individualistic and incomplete perspectives. The images of Christ have been insufficient and confusing not revealing His person and message. This opens up a mission field for the proclamation of a Biblical Christ who is deeply interested in the holistic redemption of everyone.

At the end of his Gospel, the apostle John records the call of the Risen Christ to his disciples, still fearful and confused with the events that had occurred, with the following words: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). That is also Jesus' call to

His church today to fulfill His mandate in our generation and be agents of transformation and hope in the midst of a suffering society.

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