

# DOING THEOLOGY FROM THE CONTEXT OF POVERTY: TOWARDS A NEW PARADIGM FOR THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE FROM LATIN AMERICA.

Federico Melendez, Mariano Galvez University of Guatemala

Oliver Phillips, Director, Mission Strategy US/Canada

## *Introduction*

It is well known the preferential option that John Wesley and Phineas Breese had for the poor. The context of the Industrial Revolution in England in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and its continuation in the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought severe social dislocations in these countries, and brought wealth for the new industrial bourgeoisie, but it also brought enormous urban poverty for the peasants, generating the new proletarian poor.

Both heroes lived this social phenomenon, and they chose to identify in their struggles, centering their evangelistic efforts among the poor. More than three centuries have now passed and the Church of the Nazarene as a heir of the Wesleyan tradition seeks to identify herself as an international holiness church and inevitably as it extends its message around the third world faces the same social strains and problems that these heroes lived when they faced poverty.

The Church of the Nazarene no longer belongs to the rich countries that once sent their missionaries to the third world, now she spreads the Gospel in the world of the poor of Africa, Asia and Latin America. With such a challenge, the Church of the Nazarene it now requires true conversion for the poor and generate an ethical social holiness revolution that would help to change the social evils of our day. Theological education can and must contribute to achieve this end.

If the century of Wesley saw the first Industrial Revolution that caused the huge displacements from the countryside to the cities in England, now the third Industrial Revolution is conforming and displacing millions of immigrants from the third to the first world. The poor migrate by the thousands from Latin America to the United States, and from Africa and Asia to Europe. The same displacement is observed within the great capitals of Latin America, whereas the continent is moving from the rural to urban areas.

Poverty has also grown within the rich countries, especially from the ethnic minorities. Since poverty is a global problem, it also requires global solutions, and the church through education can and must do its own part. As never before the north and the south have never been so close together thanks to the marvelous and advanced steps of

science and technology such as, computer science, biotechnology and so on. Money also moves from one place to another through electronic means. Business is established worldwide, yet north and south are deeply divided between the rich and the poor, as noted Argentinean ethicist states:

“At the beginning of the XXI century humanity counts on immense productive forces...and yet 1300 million persons lack of the basic resources for life, and must live with less than two dollars a day; 1300 millions peoples lack water; 3000 millions more lack of sanitary conditions, and 2000 million peoples don't have electricity. (Bernardo Klisberg, *Mas etica mas Desarrollo*: 23).

As a good sign towards the poor, the church of the Nazarene has opened its doors to the leadership from the ethnic minorities from the USA and the different regions worldwide, but it requires more efforts to change in order to become a truly international body.

In the present paper I will introduce two great challenges for education and theological education in particular, which would challenge the entire church of the Nazarene. This is written from the particular perspective of the Latin America poor, being myself born and raised in Guatemala, and knowing by first hand what it means to be poor.

### *The challenge of poverty and theological education*

#### *A. The Compassionate mission of the Church*

The first great challenge for education and theological education in particular is to transform the educational institutions of the church of the Nazarene in institutions that fulfill the compassionate mission of the church, and make compassion their central core of action and reflection. If poverty is a worldwide problem, why we can not make a difference by changing ourselves and our institutions on their behalf?

The compassionate mission of the church is already given, but it lacks of a theology and a theological education committed with this mission. My critic goes towards the models of seminary and the theological education that we have inherited and developed. This particular education has been more for the training of pastors as, academic experts for the theological and biblical disciplines but less informed and formed in the compassionate mission of the church. Our scholars need to be also experts on the mission of the church. Mission and theological education has been separated from each

other. ¿What is the purpose of theology if not to fulfill the mission of the church? It seems to me that we live under tension between mission and education. Theology is irrelevant without mission.

We acknowledge that the Church of the Nazarene is not an homogeneous unit, and that both North and South do theology from different angles. One thing is to do theology from the context of material fulfillment of the first world (USA) and another very different is to do theology from the context of poor societies (Latin America). This simple fact seems to be ignored many times by our own theological leaders and by our own theological institutions.

According with the Wesleyan model, his option was to minister with and for the poor of his own times and to evaluate critically the use and abuse of wealth by the Methodist rich. I think the Church of the Nazarene faces today the same challenge: to become a church for and to the poor of the world, and evaluate critically the role of those who have riches. These tensions have already being experienced by the Church of the Nazarene in its early years when she was born as a church of the poor, according with Phienas Breese. The church was later transformed into a middle class church, and it is well known that the white middle class from the United States is representative of the middle class of the first world, who have developed the theological framework of the Church up to the present time.

What had happened with the Methodists even in Wesley's life was the sudden loss of the social (communal) dimension of holiness due to the increase of personal wealth, and faith that works by love was lost by an individualistic ethic, and the works of love were lost. Sounds familiar today?

This challenge continues to be alive for the Wesleyan middle class especially the middle class from the United States, since it is known as Wesley once said, that to increase riches, is to decrease holiness.

The consumption society has established its own rules and the god of wealth has required from us our last loyalty, and to accommodate ourselves to its requirements and conveniences. This scheme is both personal and is also imposed upon the world by our Global economy and the international finances. In this sense, the rich countries always

impose their will upon the poor, and this tendency could also be seen in the structures of the church, especially through the powerful mission boards that end doing their own will.

Is it possible to change this trend of our world? I think we can change by our own conversion to the cries of the poor, as Christ did, and John Wesley did in his own time. How? I suggest these two avenues:

1. To create awareness and educate the Church, both from Latin America and the United States, upon the realities of poverty around the world, and how the economic systems influence the lives of people and societies. To do theology from and for the poor could mean two different things from the rich and the poor. To be exposed to poverty worldwide is more in the hands of the rich (the north) than those of the poor, (the south). Rich Nazarenes could travel to any part of the world through work and witness teams, and be exposed to the cruel realities of the poor. Some of them do.
2. To design the next world theology conference on the theme of poverty around the globe. This world conference should be held in Africa as a representative country of the poor, and should be designed by both educators from the first and the third world.

#### *B. Theological writings and reflection*

The second great challenge to transform our institutions, particularly our theological institutions would be the production of writings on the subject of the compassionate mission of the church. These writings should be both on the academic and the popular level in order to educate the church: Do we not have Nazarene scholar's critic enough of our own theological accommodation? Do we not need scholars to write on the social injustices of our world and the economic models that we have accepted without even criticizing and evaluating them in the light of the Word and our Wesleyan tradition? It is a necessity to write on the theology of the compassionate nature and mission of the church of the Nazarene according with the doctrinal framework of Wesleyanism and of the global economy of the XXI century.

By the eighties some progressive missionary sectors within the church of the Nazarene in the United States began to experience with the compassionate ministries to deal with the issue of poverty and the third world along with the urban centers in the

larger cities of the United States largely among ethnic minorities. It was the birth of compassionate ministries of the church. The names of Steve Weber and Tom Nees are significant in the development of compassionate ministries in the church. Many people, especially professionals joined in the effort, both in the United States and in Latin America. It was a new rebirth of the Church of the Nazarene, and a new hope for the poor.

It is peculiar that in Latin America, in the same decade, began a formal theological reflection on social issues and evangelism for the continent, and an evangelical theology on the mission and nature of the church was born. The background to understand this phenomenon was also the renewal of the Roman Catholic Church, since Vatican II in the 60s.

The Methodist Church in Latin America found its roots in the Wesleyan tradition and a critical thought was developed by some important theologians, such as the Mexican Gonzalo Baez Camargo and the Argentinean, Jose Miguez Bonino. Recently Justo Gonzalez translated the works of John Wesley and Spanish, and thanks to Gonzalez, now Wesley also speaks Spanish. With this basic ground, I wrote my own modest contribution on Wesley's economic ethics and its legacy for the church in Latin America. This presentation in line with this basic thought.

With these words what I want to say is that the Church of the Nazarene has a major debt with a serious theological reflection from the third world. The third world now is asking a space to be listened, and the compassionate mission of the church fits into this purpose. The compassionate mission of the church is a key factor on a renewal of the organization, and education, theological education in particular, are the eyes and hands of compassion. It is now to change and join hands on behalf of the poor of our world.

What we can do as a church, especially from our theological institutions and compassionate ministries to reach these objectives, since we know that it is an education where we have the future of the church? I propose the following course of action which could help us in this endeavor.

*Course of action to become educational institutions  
for the compassionate mission of the church*

1. To integrate education and compassionate mission would require the integration of the present compassionate ministries and our educational institutions worldwide.
2. It is now clear that if the Church of the Nazarene pretends to be an international body, such as I believe it is, it must include the issues the social issues of poverty, hunger and justice and the world, as well as a become a critic toward the economic models that oppress our world.
3. Theological education should be education for the compassionate mission of the church. Theology at the service of mission and the kingdom of God within the framework of Wesleyanism.
4. Retake and study social redemption, good works, faith that works through love as the best expressions of Wesleyanism for the cries our world today.
5. We must issue a call to a true conversion from the rich in both the first and the third world and the simple life style and spirituality. Post modern societies should sacrifice their values for the values of the Kingdom of God. True conversion is required.
6. To review and retake the manual of IBOE and how she fulfills the compassionate mission of the church worldwide.
7. Our institutions of education in the United States (liberal arts colleges) should be geared toward the social issues of the third world, and their research should reflect this commitment.
8. It is necessary to integrate faith and science to the mission and nature of the church. Christian vocation should be one for all human professions. We need to integrate theology and the diverse university disciplines.
9. To promote the compassionate mission of the church, an interchange of students and teachers is a requirement. Colleges and graduate schools should make the difference sending their students for training and service in third world countries. Missionary young Mormons are well known worldwide. Why Nazarene college students are not sent around the world, to fulfill the mission of the church?
10. That our colleges and theological institutions engage in research on the problems of hunger and poverty, and do something about it,

11. It is an imperative to write on these subjects specially from the third world, since there is no theology or a social ethic that guide our plan of action,
12. To create a world wide center for theological and social concern issues We offer Guatemala which could be an ideal place, since the country has the major percentage of evangelicals in Latin America.
13. To correct current policies of self support of our theological seminaries in Latin America based on the rentals of our campuses. It hurts theological education and endangers its future.
14. Non missionary personnel, that is, nationals, need more support in education to do both their research, teaching and writing. More solidarity is needed instead of isolation.
15. Compassionate ministries should not be viewed as isolated ministries but as the core of the mission of the church and of theological education,
16. To work the international process of the church, not on the administrative levels but on the nature of the church and her compassionate mission.

#### *Conclusion*

Am I so naïve when I write on these simple and yet profound issues? What about the other challenges, especially those of the post modern societies and the new technologies such as genetics, computer science, communications, and so on? Personally I believe these other issues as important as they are, are only the expression of the economic profile of the first world, and they belong to the world of the consumer society. In other words they are for sale, but we don't sale our mission.

#### *Reflective response by Oliver R. Phillips*

I commend my colleague on a somewhat exhaustive treatment of the topic before us today. The Church of the Nazarene is richer because of such theological exposure.

In response to this treatise, I would like to add a parallel commentary, not designed to necessarily critique, but to expand on the task before us.

I would reverently suggest that, as I see it, in recognition of the historic fidelity that must be attached to the Wesleyan heritage, the challenge before us whether in Latin America or in the US, is a disconnect between our ecclesiology and our resultant

missiology. Because our ecclesiology has been flawed the missiological mandate has lost its focus. As Segundo once suggested, the church should be comprised of those willing to take seriously the demands that Jesus makes on his disciples.

When one says that the *church* has a ministry in the world, what one means by *church* must also be clearly defined. The church, having come into existence through the power of the gospel, participates in the apostolic mandate in the following threefold sequence:

**GOSPEL→→→CHURCH→→→MISSION**

In this diagram the gospel is the source of the mandate to be involved in specific mission activities. The church is strategically placed between the gospel and its mission. In this way, the church is not the end result of the gospel by virtue of its own existence; it exists for the purpose of carrying the gospel to the world through mission. Conversely, no mission is capable of sustaining itself as an activity or organization except as it is grounded in the life of the church through the power and authority of the gospel.

The theological exercise we are called to engage praxis is, however, directed from mission toward gospel. It requires of us that we look back upon the gospel as the authority, content, and power of the mission. Consequently, the previous threefold sequence would look this way:

**GOSPEL←←←CHURCH←←←MISSION**

Those who become involved in mission as the work of Christ must reflect back upon the relation of that specific mission activity to the church and to the gospel. An interesting discovery emerges from this reflection, and it is this: The church is neither the origin nor the source of mission. It must be grounded in its own source which is the gospel. On the other hand, the church cannot become the institutional form of gospel, it must be grounded in the work of mission.

No one understood more clearly this compelling call to be engaged in mission as did the Apostle Paul. He saw his mission as a calling to preach the gospel, yet, “not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on another man’s foundation” (Rom. 15:20). It is here that Paul demonstrates the differential between the apostolic and the theological mandates. The task before him was to assist in the project to Jerusalem, the sending of a major offering for the needy. Paul does not create a mission and an organization that

“leapfrogs” over the church, but rather sees his mission as part of the church’s task.

The point I would like to make here is that the church is one of many Christian organizations, and that all Christian organizations must seek to fulfill the mandate of Christ in mission. To make relevance of this point it is necessary to delineate what one means by *church* and Christian *organization*. The church must be the middle ground on the continuum of gospel and mission. Because the church or the body of Christ is always a specific grouping of people, called out, it more often than not, has a geographical center or location. It is this recognition of a geographical church that led to the church being a parish, with a parochial identity. This parochial form of the church is a specific gathering of Christians in a localized setting (Rom. 16:16; 16:23).

A careful analysis and inventory of the situation of Paul and the activities in the early church would reveal that no church in the parochial sense took the responsibility to organize and carry out the mission of the love-offerings. Paul recognized the tension between the parochial and nonparochial forms of the church, yet he does not hesitate to expedite the activity as a legitimate expression of the “total church,” thereby creating a new organization to carry out the mission.

Liberation theology in Latin America evolved as Christians sought to understand their role in the context of the revolutionary struggle against imperialism and cultural oppression. If to ask the question of the significance of the Gospel in the midst of suffering, alienation, exploitation, and oppression is wrong, then one must also interrogate the commitment of the Liberator Christ who addressed in no uncertain terms, the powers that be in his time. This has become the starting point of theology in Latin America. It is at the very heart of the determination to liberate theology from its captivity to the theological norms of the Euro-American colonial empire.

Itself an ever evolving approach to theology, liberation theology as it has developed is not perfect, nor is it a model to be emulated. Nevertheless, to disregard the contributions made to the worldwide mosaic of theologies that seek to bring relevance to the Gospel in a postmodern world would be a tragedy indeed.

If our ecclesiology is realigned with our missiology, we would discover that Nazarenes could recover this passion to be involved in the common good of humanity. I suggest:

- Nazarenes are a relational people. We need to seize the opportunity to build relationships of trust with others involved in working for social reform.
- Nazarenes are a compassionate people. We care about the world. We are taught to care about the world. We need to tap us into direct, personal relationships with people who are struggling because of the injustice they are experiencing.
- Nazarene engagement in public life must be built upon the formation of a solid biblical theology of justice. It takes continuous biblical reflection

### *Works Cited*

- Baez Camargo, Genio y espiritu del Metodismo Wesleyano, Mexico DF: casa Unida de Publicaciones, 1962.
- Comblin, Jose, Crisitanos rumbo al siglo XII, Nuevo camino de liberacion, traducido por Jose Francisco Domingo, Madrid: San Pablo artes graficias 1997.
- Chilcote Paul W, editor, Wesleyan Tradition A Paradigm por Renewal, Nashville TN: Abigdon Press 2002
- Cook Franklin, Steve Weber, The Greening, the story of Nazarene Compassaniote Ministries, Kansas city: Nazarene Publishing House 1986.
- Escobar Samuel, Tiempo de Mision, America Latina y la mision cristiana hoy, Guatemala: ediciones Clara Semilla, 1999.
- Gonzales Justo, editor general, Obras de Wesley, traductores Hugo Ortega y Jose Miguez Bonino, Nora Radaelli, Edgar Gonzalez y Julio Sabanes, Nashville TN: providence House Publishers, 1998, 14 volumenenes.
- Hynson Leon To ToReform the Nation, Theological Foundations of Wesley's ethics, Grand Rapids Michigan: Francis Asbury Press 1984.
- Jennings Theodore W Jr. Good News to the poor John Wesley's Evangelical Economics. Nasvhille TN: Abigdon press 1990.
- Marquardt Mangred, Hon Wesley's Social ethics Praxis and Principles, translated from german by John Steel and Sthepen Gunther, Nasvhille TN, Abigdon Press 1992
- Padilla Rene, Economia Humana y economia del Reino de Dios, Buenos Aires: Kairos, 1992.