

A Steep Climb ahead for Theology in Latin America

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The decade of the sixties saw the development of what might well be considered the first Latin American Protestant theological movement. We are referring to the group of thinkers related to the Latin American Commission on Church and Society (ISAL),¹ and, through this commission, to the World Council of Churches. Their purpose is to provide an interpretation of the Latin American situation (including the problems of under-development and social injustice) as the basis for Christian involvement in political life. Their theology-in-the-making is set forth in an extensive bibliography that includes several books and hundreds of articles.

To C. Peter Wagner, Associate General Director of the Andes Evangelical Mission, belongs the credit for having written and published the first book whose objective is to examine the position of ISAL and to propose an alternative that attempts to be “biblical and evangelical”: *Latin American Theology, Radical or Evangelical?*² The effort is commendable, even more so because, as the author himself mentions, the subject is one that should be discussed “by a native Latin American, if possible, not by a Latin-Americanized gringo.”³ To this may be added the merit of “more of a journalistic than a scholarly style” that places the discussion within the reach of the average reader.

In a recent article on Latin American Protestantism,⁴ W. Dayton Roberts stated, “Doctrinally, in Latin America the left

and the right are not too far apart.” This position is completely unacceptable to the person who is even moderately familiar with the writings of ISAL. It is an over-simplification of the problem and as such gives a false impression of the unity of the Protestant movement in Latin America. The sooner it is recognized that this new theology (practically the only one being attempted in our midst at present) is a Latin American version of the “secular theology” (or “anthropology”?) wrought in Europe and the United States in the last few years, the better. The equation of ideology (Marxism) and faith (Christianity), the erasing of the boundary between the church and the world, the sanctification of the revolution, the rejection of biblical authority—these are the strands with which the theology of ISAL is woven. It does a favor to no one, and even less to the cause of Jesus Christ, to overlook the profound differences between this theology and any other that attempts to find its source in the biblical message.

Wagner has done well in calling attention to the danger that the new theological movement holds for the church. One of his main theses is that “the theology of the new radical left of Latin American Protestantism is, in its extreme expression, a form of syncretism.”⁵ If proof should be required, it is sufficient to mention the assertion made by the present General Secretary of ISAL, Julio de Santa Ana: “It is no longer possible to continue to maintain the distinction between ideology and faith, to which theology gives doctrinal content.”⁶ The greatest service Wagner has rendered to evangelicals is simply to put them on guard against what may be considered the most significant secularization of the Christian faith ever produced in Protestant circles in Latin America—the “new radical left.”

It cannot be expected that in a popular book such as this one the analysis of positions should go too deep. But even recognizing the limitations that the author himself has set so as to reach “the majority of Latin American pastors,” it is difficult to find an explanation for the superficiality that is shown throughout the whole study. It is surprising, for example, to see that the names of Miguez Bonino and Justo L. Gonzalez are placed within the ranks of the radical left, without taking into account Miguez’s appeal for “a theology of ‘the church and the world’ that is faithful to the totality of the biblical witness” and Gonzalez’s warning against the dangers of “Ebionism.” Equally surprising is the repetition of expressions such as “win souls to Christ,” “save the lost,” “baptize new members in the church,” as if these formulae exhausted the significance of the mission of the church. Obviously the author has preferred to avoid even the least effort to let the position of those with whom he is in disagreement serve as a corrective to his own position. This prevents him from doing justice to those who, like the two theologians mentioned above, without wanting to identify themselves with the radical left, do not accept as biblical the definition of evangelism as simply “the salvation of souls.” Is not more harm than good done to the cause of the Gospel when we close our eyes to the problem that is posed by the customary divorce between evangelism and social responsibility, between the individual and society, between personal salvation and the creation of a new humanity in Christ? Is not the radical leftist theology itself, at least in part, a reaction against the deadly reduction of the Christian mission that has characterized Latin American Protestantism?

It is regrettable that Wagner should not see in the new theology an appeal for change, for correction (however minimal) of concepts related to the mission of the church. Far from it, he appeals to Dr. Donald McGavran's ideas on "Church Growth" and from this perspective defines the mission of the church in terms of *numerical growth*. No one would deny that this is "the characteristic view of today's Latin American Protestantism."⁷ Moreover, one must readily admit that the multiplication of the number of believers was of deep concern to the first preachers of the Gospel and ought to be of concern to anyone who calls himself a Christian. But what neither McGavran nor any of his disciples (including Wagner) has proved is that the New Testament gives a basis for equating the "*make disciples*" of the great commission with the "*multiply the number of converts to Christianity*" implicit in the "Church Growth" theory. Wagner assumes that it can be taken for granted that "the church's mission is to bring more people into the congregation,"⁸ but the fact of the matter is that there is still a long way to go before it can be established that this is a *biblical* definition of the Christian mission. As Pastor Arnaldo Canclini stated in his paper presented at the First Latin American Congress on Evangelism, in the New Testament "we are not forbidden to count, nor to keep records, nor to seek numerical growth, but we are shown that this is not what represents the only basis on which to measure the growth of the body of Christ which is the church." One need not accept a leftist theology to recognize the dangers inherent in an excessive emphasis on numbers. This *numerolatry* in conservative circles has caused an almost complete neglect of theological thinking and has replaced the "*make disciples*" with a cheap evan-

gelism. It is high time that we who take pride in calling ourselves "Evangelicals" recognize that the very absence of qualified theologians among us in Latin America is the natural result of our amputation of the Gospel, our lack of concern to teach "the whole counsel of God," our constant separation of the *kerygma* from the *didache*. We cannot see the importance of training theologians because we believe that the mission of the church is essentially and almost exclusively "numerical growth." Such a concept of mission is not derived from the Bible, rather, it reflects a "success" philosophy, a mentality conditioned by a materialistic culture. It corroborates Erich Fromm's recent evaluation: "Our age has found a substitute for God—the impersonal calculation. This new god has turned into an idol to whom all men may be sacrificed. A new concept of the sacred and unquestionable is arising: that of calculability, probability, factuality."⁹

It is scarcely necessary to clarify that to object to "Church Growth," the methodology sponsored by the School of World Mission and Institute of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary and directed by McGavran, is not the same as to object to the growth of the church, to the spontaneous expansion of the Christian community through the work of the Lord. "Church Growth" and the growth of the church are not interchangeable terms, as Wagner seems to suggest. Without underestimating the contribution that McGavran and his co-workers are making in certain aspects of the Christian mission, it must be warned that his system has become a new "fad" among evangelicals, a dangerous threat to the true, biblical growth of the church. It is a new version of the old Constantinism, and like it is aimed similarly at the "Christianization" of the

multitudes at the expense of the integrity of the Gospel. Should such Christianization be accomplished, the church would become little more than a "mass of baptized unbelievers." If we want to avoid this, we would do well to pay attention to Soren Kierkegaard's words, as relevant today as when he wrote them: "For long the tactics have been: use every means to move as many as you can, to move everybody if possible, to enter Christianity. Do not be too curious whether what they enter *is* Christianity. My tactics have been, with God's help, to use every means to make it clear what the demand of Christianity really is—if not one entered it."¹⁰ Or must we let the obsession with statistics replace Jesus Christ's "tactics" in Luke 14:25—33?

BIBLICAL TEACHING OR SYNCRETISM?

Wagner claims that the new radical left that has sprung up in Latin America represents a form of syncretism. "In the attempt to make the Christian message relevant to a society caught in the throes of rapid social change, some of the representatives of this group go so far in their reduction and rephrasing of the message that they end up with 'another gospel' . . . In its extreme forms it represents a capitulation of Christianity to secularism."¹¹ It is doubtful that his verdict could be refuted; a superficial examination of ISAL documents is enough to demonstrate that, in effect, the acids of secularism have corroded the theological structure of ISAL from the very foundation. Wagner is right when he points out that "in many cases, representatives of the Latin American radical left begin with *a priori* socio-economic-political viewpoints and formulate a theology that will support these."

Nevertheless, the question arises whether essentially the same criticism is not equally applicable to the position from which the author himself writes. We have already mentioned the absence of biblical bases for the idea that the mission of the church consists primarily in "bringing more people into the congregation." It may well be added that the book, *The Bridges of God*, "the *magna carta* of the church growth movement,"¹³ by Dr. McGavran, is a wonderful example of how it is possible, with imagination, to formulate a theology that in reality begins with "*a priori* viewpoints" but maintains the facade of "biblicalness." By way of example, it is sufficient to mention the method used to demonstrate that the apostle Paul (like the first preachers of the Gospel) limited himself to preaching to those who were "predisposed" to accept the Christian faith. This thesis is of special interest, because it serves as the basis for the formulation of a whole new strategy of mission, a strategy that claims to be the application of the Pauline method, but which also takes into account the use of methods that modern technology has put at the disposal of the church. It is taken for granted that it is possible by means of statistical calculations to determine whether or not a group of people is "predisposed" to accept the Gospel. The claim is made that "only those movements which are growing at the rate of fifty per cent per decade or more should be considered growing churches."¹⁴ Such expressions as "growth specialists," "the business of witnessing," "cost per person," are coined for the new science of "Church Growth." With all the honesty that the case deserves, we must ask ourselves if what we have here is not another form of "syncretism by accommodation." In his recent analysis of the present technological society, Erich

Fromm states that man's need for certainty in the modern world "creates the need for what amounts to blind belief in the efficiency of the method of computerized planning. The managers are relieved from doubt, and so are those who are employed in the organization. It is precisely the fact that man's judgment and emotions do *not* interfere with the process of decision-making that gives the computer-based planning its godlike quality."¹⁵ There is, then, a basis to suspect that the ideology of "Church Growth" has its roots in an assumption characteristic of the technological society. If the leftist theology is the outgrowth of Marxist socio-economic and political presuppositions, "Church Growth" responds to capitalistic presuppositions. In the first case, the Gospel is *replaced*; in the second, it is *reduced*. In both cases, the determining factor is not biblical teaching, but the influence of secularism.

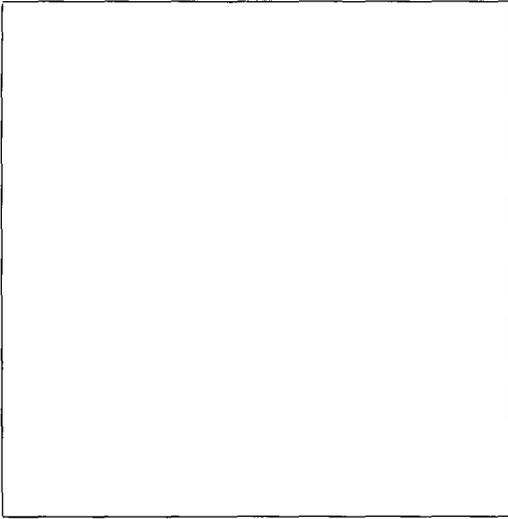
THEOLOGIAN OR EXPERTS IN CHURCH GROWTH?

Our obsession for numbers has so clouded our vision that we have not given the theological foundation its proper place. Wagner recognizes the absence of "conservative evangelical" theologians in Latin America and suggests several factors that have contributed to this underdevelopment. One of them is, says he, that "in the context of a rapidly growing church, theological pursuits are considered a luxury."¹⁶ Here is the root of the problem—we have created a divorce between evangelization and theology, between preaching and teaching, between conversion and discipleship. As a result, we have fallen into *numerolatry*. And the same situation

will be perpetuated wherever the philosophy of statistical success, now sponsored by "Church Growth," holds sway. There will not be theologians, but there will be "growth specialists." There will not be money for scholarships, but there will be plenty of funds for computers. There will not be literature to help Christians adopt a responsible position regarding the crucial problems that confront the world today in faithfulness to Jesus Christ, but there will be little books on the use of "brainwashing" techniques in evangelism. Should we be surprised, then, that all over Latin America, while the masses enter the churches through the front door, a growing number of young people from an evangelical background leave them through the back door? As John A. Mackay has said, "We must educate Christians theologically, explaining to them the total dimension of the Christian faith in the form most intelligible to them. If we do not do this, we run the risk that especially the young people will fall in love with other philosophies of life."¹⁷ Is theology really a luxury?

THE CRUX OF THE MATTER

Wagner's concern to establish the priority of evangelism in the mission of the church is understandable. Evangelism is not optional for the church, and there is no evangelism without proclamation, the Gospel is a message that must be *proclaimed*. This is true. And it is biblical. But equally true and biblical is the fact that the Gospel is a message that must be *lived*. It must be lived out *within a definite social context, with all its needs and problems*. It must be lived out, *in terms of a continual self-giving, motivated by love, in service to one's*



tian discipleship. He has made clear how steep a climb there is ahead for Evangelical theology in Latin America. He has shown us our deep need to return to the Bible to find freedom from a subtle idolatry—ecclesiasticism. Because, in the ultimate analysis, here is the crux of the matter: an understanding of the mission of the church in which the church occupies the central place, the place that rightly belongs to Jesus Christ. The following words by Roland Allen, the great “missionologist,” from a book written more than fifty years ago, are very timely:

neighbor. The proclamation of the Gospel (*kerygma*) and the demonstration of the Gospel through service (*diakonia*) form an indivisible whole. The one without the other is an incomplete, mutilated gospel and, consequently, contrary to the will of God. From this perspective, it is foolish to ask about the relative importance of evangelism and social responsibility. It is the same as to ask which wing of an airplane is more important, the right or the left.

In the final analysis, what Wagner offers us is one incomplete interpretation in contrast to another incomplete interpretation of the mission of the church. However “evangelical” it may be, his position fails, as much as the other, to do justice to the New Testament teaching concerning God’s purpose for the church. Unintentionally, therefore, he has put his finger on one of the sore spots that afflict Latin American evangelicals, among whom we include ourselves: our theological poverty and its influence over the concept we have of our mission as the church of Jesus Christ. He has shown us how far we have yet to go before we arrive at that integration of the Gospel with life that is involved in Chris-

The Society is the Body of Christ, nevertheless it makes all the difference whether we habitually think and speak of the Society or of Christ. The one habit tends to make us proselytize, to add numbers to our side and to glory in the flesh of our converts . . . But if our minds habitually rest in Christ this is impossible. We do not therefore think lightly of the Body of Christ, because we see that Christ is more than the Body. The only difference is that if our minds rest in the idea of the church we can be absorbed in the external: if our minds rest in Christ we cannot. In the one case we can become partisans of a limited and imperfect society, in the other we cannot. Yet men speak of the extension of the church as identical with the revelation of Christ. It is easy to say that they are the same, because the manifestation of Christ is in and through the perfecting of the church. But it is not reason thus to confound Christ with his church. Christ and the church are not convertible terms. It is not the same thing to seek the manifestation of Christ in the growth of the church, and to seek the growth of the church. In the one case “Christ,” in the other “the church” occupies the

center of thought; and the effect of that difference upon all missionary work is most profound and far-reaching.²⁰

NOTES

¹ "ISAL" are the initials of the Spanish name of the Latin American Commission on Church and Society: *Iglesia y Sociedad en América Latina*.

² The full title is: *Latin American Theology, Radical or Evangelical? The Struggle for the Faith in a Young Church* (Grand Rapids, 1970). The Spanish translation, *Teología Latinoamericana: Izquierdista o Evangélica?* was published shortly before (Miami, 1969), and circulated during the Congress on Evangelism held in Bogota, Colombia, November, 1969. A few months before Wagner's book was published, a brief but incisive critique of the ISAL theology, written by the Argentine theologian José Míguez Bonino, came out in *Cuadernos de Marcha* Nro. 29 (September, 1969), a monthly magazine published by *avant-garde* Catholics in Uruguay.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁴ "Latin American Protestants: Which Way Will They Go?," *Christianity Today*, XIV, 1 (October 10, 1969), pp. 14-16.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁶ "ISAL, un movimiento en marcha," *Cuadernos de Marcha*, No. 29 (September, 1969), p. 55.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 74.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁹ *The Revolution of Hope* (New York, 1968), p. 54.

¹⁰ Quoted by P. T. Forsyth in *The Work of Christ* (London, 1965), p. 35.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 77.

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 78.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁴ *The Bridges of God* (London, 1957), p. 113.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 50.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 82.

¹⁷ *Realidad e Idolatría del Cristianismo Contemporáneo* (Buenos Aires, 1970), p. 25.

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 101.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 103.

²⁰ *Missionary Principles*, (Grand Rapids, 1964), pp. 92-93.