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Protestantism in Latin America and the Caribbean Searching for its identity

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Abstract:

The paper traces the key developments taking place within the Protestant movement in Latin America and the Caribbean, including both the churches and ecumenical organizations. The analysis begins in 1949, trying to provide a larger picture of the international scenario. A major emphasis is placed on the influences of the ecumenical movement, particularly the World Council of Churches. Liberation Theology and its prominence as a progressive movement in the churches is a key component as a major influence. The impact of the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church is highlighted. The process that concluded at the formation of the Latin American Council of Churches in Oaxtepec, Mexico, 1978 is also stressed.

The main focus of this paper is to trace the key developments that have taken place within Liberal Protestantism in Latin America, in the last 50 years. The analysis begins in 1949 and tries to highlight important events up to the founding of the Latin American Council of Church in Oaxtepec, Mexico, 1978.

The 1949 to 1959 decade was a crucial one for Latin America and the Caribbean. Among other important international events, the People's Revolution in China closed the doors to Western missionaries, and many were relocated in Latin America.¹ Protestant groups like the Pentecostals

¹ Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century*, 78-86, 135.

and evangelicals grew very quickly in Latin America during this decade. The Cuban Revolution became the most important political movement and event of the decade, changing the religious and socio-political scenario in the region. ²

The impact of the Second Ecumenical Council of the Catholic Church (1962-65) was evident and relevant for Protestant churches in Latin America and the Caribbean. It coincided with a wave of renewal and progressive forces within the ecumenical movement, particularly the World Council of Churches.

Other events and shifts in thinking also contributed to the ecumenical dialogue, such as Liberation Theology movement and the conciliar process on development, liberation and justice debated at the World Conference on Church and Society of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland (1966). Third world theologies were becoming more visible and influential. As a result, the 1973 Assembly of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) of the World Council of Churches in Thailand, with its emphasis on salvation and liberation, became a turning point for the WCC and the ecumenical movement.

The conciliar movement expressed in the World Council of Churches shifted from a theology of missions to a theology of mission, singular; with the main emphasis on God as a missionary God. The Church in this new framework joined in the initiative from God as a missionary God in the diaspora of the world, making the concept *missio Dei* more predominant. The convergence with the *aggiornamento* and opening to a transforming dimension of the gospel and mission in the Catholic Church, emphasized in the context of the Second Vatican Council, is more that evident. ³

The II Latin American Evangelical Conference (CELA) was held in Lima, Peru, in 1961. While affirming that Christ is the hope for Latin America, the Conference highlighted the need for an effective testimony, an attitude of humility in carrying out mission, and sufficient theological background for proclaiming the Gospel. The participants concluded that the work of carrying out God's mission should be done with both personal action and social militancy. ⁴ They also stated that the churches

² Jean-Pierre Bastián, *Historia del protestantismo en América Latina* (Mexico City: CUPSA, 1986), 198-200.

³ Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century*, 168-192.

⁴ CELA, *Cristo la esperanza para América Latina* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Confederación Evangélica del Río de la Plata, 1962).

must increase their presence in national life and in international ecumenical collaboration.⁵

Councils and federations of churches from the different countries in Latin America and the Caribbean initiated a group called Evangelical Unity in Latin America (UNELAM) in Río de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1963. The main purpose of this provisional, temporary commission was to promote Christian unity among the churches and ecumenical organizations in order to organize an assembly of churches to establish a Council of Churches.⁶ UNELAM was an efficient instrument for dialogue, consultation, and planning.⁷ When the assembly was convened in Oaxtepec, Mexico, in September of 1978, UNELAM ceased to exist; it took seriously the provisional character of its mission.⁸

Two new ecumenical movements were founded between 1960 and 1970 in Latin American ecumenism: Church and Society (ISAL), and the Evangelical Commission on Christian Education in Latin America (CELADEC). Two youth movements had played important roles during the two previous decades: ULAJE (The Evangelical Union of Latin American Youth), and WSCF (World Student Christian Federation).

A prophetic and critical analysis of the role of the church in Latin America at the time influenced both Catholic and Protestant sectors.⁹ In

⁵ José Míguez Bonino, *Hacia un protestantismo ecuménico: Notas para una evaluación histórica del protestantismo entre la I y la II CELA (1949-1960)*, CLAI, Oaxtepec 1978 (San Jose, CLAI, 1980), 65-80. Míguez traces the movement from what he calls "Evangelical Liberalism" to "Neo-orthodoxy." He points out that the search for identity of a Protestantism that is both faithful to its mission and is relevant in the changing and conflicting realities of Latin America and its ecumenical vocation.

⁶ Marcelo Pérez Rivas, "El ecumenismo en América Latina" in Norman Goodall, *El movimiento ecuménico* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: La Aurora, 1970), 226-228.

⁷ Orlando E. Costas, *Theology at the Crossroads* (Amsterdam, the Netherlands: RODOPI, 1976), 237-240, characterizes UNELAM as a "bridge-builder" that has limitations yet succeeds in engaging the churches in a process of mission and unity.

⁸ Benjamín Santana, *Oaxtepec, Celebración y Búsqueda*, CLAI, Oaxtepec 1978, 133. Rev. Santana, a Methodist pastor from Puerto Rico and president of the organizing Committee of the Assembly of Churches in Oaxtepec, made some remarks about the temporary character of UNELAM in this his inaugural speech.

Juan Marcos Rivera, the Executive Secretary for the Organization of the Assembly of Churches in Oaxtepec 1978, was a key leader of UNELAM. A Disciples missionary in Paraguay and Venezuela, Rivera played a crucial role in organizing a Council of Churches. He patiently helped to design an Assembly that was participatory and democratic. In spite of all the obstacles Rivera succeeded in turning over the work done by UNELAM to CLAI and dissolving UNELAM during that same Assembly. For a personal testimony of this process, see Juan Marcos Rivera, *El rol de la Comisión Organizadora de la Asamblea de Iglesias*, unpublished manuscript, 1-5.

⁹ Orlando E. Costas, "Missiology in Contemporary Latin America: A Survey," *Missiology* V (1) (January 1977), 90-114.

1964 Richard Shaull,¹⁰ a Presbyterian missionary from the United States working first in Colombia and later in Brazil, wrote the most influential article on ecclesiology ever written in Protestant circles in Latin America, the title of which in itself is a demonstration of its prophetic tenor: “The Church in a New Diaspora.”¹¹ Shaull raised some crucial questions on the role of churches in the Latin American crisis and prophetically envisioned a new era for the church in which God created a new people through the active presence of a community based in Christ’s incarnation.¹² Shaull insisted that God’s action is manifested in His [sic] people¹³ and claimed that the church would rediscover her mission when she accepted God’s call to serve in the world as a community for God’s reign. When the church lives into this role, a new form of the church arises.¹⁴

This type of renewal was the most promising and crucial element of contemporary theology in Latin America during the 1960s, because the church was being challenged in many ways and from many different perspectives. A church willing to openly discuss its challenges need not fear the consequences and the radical implications of living God’s will. Shaull saw the action of the Spirit as a corrective element and constant source of renewal.¹⁵

¹⁰ Richard Shaull wrote a lecture to be delivered at the 1992 VII Theological Week, sponsored by Centro Antonio Valdivieso of Nicaragua. The title of this lecture is very suggestive: “The Evangelization after 500 Years.” He develops a typology with three models: the historic-missionary model, the Latin America Protestant model, and the incipient Latin American Pentecostal model. His undergirding principle is that the Church is *reformata, semper reformanda*, always in a new diaspora. These observations are taken from a first draft, thirty-nine page unpublished manuscript signed by Shaull.

¹¹ Rubem Alves, ed., *Richard Shaull: De centro do furacao* (Sao Paulo, Brazil: Sagarana Editora, 1985). This book, written by Shaull’s former students at the Presbyterian Seminary in Campinas, is a recognition of his struggles, influences, and definite place in the history of Protestant theology in Latin America. His concept of “the form of the Church in a new Diaspora” clearly relates to the new ecclesiology of the “Basic Christian Communities” in Latin America. Leonardo Boff coined the phrase “eclesiogénesis” influenced by Teilhard de Chardin, but Shaull’s influence is also evident. See José Bittencourt Filho, *Por uma ecclesologia militante: ISAL como nascedouro de uma nova ecclesologia para a América Latina* (Sao Bernardo do Campo, Brazil: Instituto Metodista de Ensino Superior, 1988), 52-55; and Leonardo Boff, *Eclogénesis: Las comunidades de base reinventan la iglesia*, trans. Juan Carlos Rodríguez (Santander, Spain: Sal Terrae, 1984), 51-76.

¹² Richard Shaull, “La forma de la iglesia en la nueva diáspora,” *Cuadernos de Marcha* 20 (September, 1969), 69-70.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 70-74.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 74-75.

¹⁵ Carmelo E. Álvarez, *Una iglesia en diáspora: Apuntes para una ecclesología solidaria* (San Jose, Costa Rica: DEI, 1991), 87-98. This article emphasizes the importance of eccles-

God has been calling the church to a new diaspora. The new diaspora is based on a biblical analysis that sees Israel as the people in dispersion searching for a more permanent society while discerning God's calling and judgment in a journey of faith.¹⁶ After more than a thousand years, Christendom is in the midst of a crisis and is being challenged to renew the existing forms of the church and make them more authentic for today.¹⁷ The people of God are seen in the New Testament as the *ecclesia* that testified and lived in pilgrimage, a model that could be an effective vision for the church today.¹⁸ The church in *koinonia* assumes the life in Christ and witnesses and shares a new spirituality as the new people of God.¹⁹

Shaul emphasizes that unless the church accepts this challenge, other sects will present a more attractive and pertinent answer to the daily need of the people. The church in this new diaspora witnesses in concrete solidarity with the struggles and aspirations of God's people and searches for new manifestations of human dignity and life.²⁰ A witnessing church serving in dispersion accepts this new form in order to serve God's purpose in this new diaspora, in history. ²¹

Participants in the III Evangelical Conference (CELA) held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1969 insisted on a new vision of the social reality. In their role as evangelizers, the churches expressed their *New Awareness* (emphases mine) in a commitment to freedom and justice. They stated that underdevelopment demands structural change in order to transform the dominant political systems into more "humanizing structures." ²² The language of this Conference was new and distinct.²³ It articulated a more prophetic and committed position inspired by the progressive elements in the ecumenical movement, particularly the WCC's

siology on the foundation of ISAL, as well as Shaul's influence and the implications for liberation theology from ecumenical and Protestant perspectives.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 78-79.

²² *Deudores al mundo* (Montevideo: UNELAM, 1969).

²³ Valdo Galland, "Report on the Third C.E.L.A.," (Geneva: DWME/CICARWS, n.d.), 1-9. Galland writes the report as a representative of the World Council of Churches after a visit to Latin America. He sees the tensions between the more avant-garde ecumenical

Church and Society. José Míguez Bonino, quoting Orlando E. Costas, affirms this stronger language:

*Orlando E. Costas, in a careful analysis of the Third Latin American Protestant Conference, has spoken of 'a new vision.' He points out that the 'socioanalytic language is more precise and committed.' It speaks of 'a socioeconomic inequality between social classes' and a call for 'a dynamic and decisive participation of all believers, including ministers, in the processes of transformation of the (existing) political systems.'*²⁴

The Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI), founded in Oaxtepec, Mexico, in 1978, adopted a yet more prophetic position, pursuing more progressive issues like solidarity with the poor, the defense of human rights, liberation, and the role of women in the churches. This Conference resulted in many programs and services that are clearly liberationist in content and praxis. CLAI's position is that evangelization and mission have a transforming presence and are committed to abolishing existing structures of injustice. CLAI was the fulfillment of the dream sparked during the Havana Congress in 1929: an ecumenical organization searching for identity and mission and promoting unity.²⁵

The Oaxtepec, Mexico, Assembly "Mission and Unity in Latin America" in 1978 has proved to be a historic moment for Latin American Protestant churches. The Assembly was under pressure because of rampant human rights violations in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Latin America.²⁶ A war in Central America, dictatorships in South America, extreme poverty throughout Latin America, and the circumstances of the "forgotten sectors" (women, indigenous groups, Afro-Latin American

movements and UNELAM. At the same time, he draws a large picture in which both the positive and negative elements are presented as a challenge for the Protestant churches in the region. An affirmation of the common task in mission and unity between the WCC and the Latin American churches concludes the report. He talks about a "stronger consciousness" and a witness that the churches assume in their Latin American identity.

²⁴ José Míguez Bonino, "A Mirror for the Ecumenical Movement? Ecumenism in Latin America," in *Voices of Unity: Essays in Honor of Dr. W. A. Visser't Hooft on the Occasion of His 80th Birthday*, ed. Ans J. van der Bent (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1983), 49-50. For a more detailed analysis of Costas' interpretation, see Orlando E. Costas, *Theology at the Crossroads in Contemporary Latin America*, 86-126.

²⁵ Dafne Sabanes Plou, *Caminos de unidad*, 118-132; and Pablo Alberto Deiros, *Historia del cristianismo en América Latina*, 810-812. See also Rubén Lores, "Some Notes on the New Spirit of Ecumenism in Latin America before and after Oaxtepec," (mimeographed presentation, NCCC-USA, 1979), 43-46.

²⁶ CLAI, Oaxtepec 1978, 209-216.

groups, and youth) were concrete and pressing issues.²⁷ The Assembly responded by addressing the character and role of power structures in society. Ecology, human life, and the need for reconciliation in the churches and in society were considered priorities integral to the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The role of the church and its mission is to proclaim God's reign for the whole of Latin America ²⁸.

The decades between 1960 and 1980 were crucial times of crisis and of hope for the Protestant Churches in Latin America.²⁹ The political, economic, social, and religious circumstances in the region are evidences of a new moment, a new *Kairos* in which the churches had an opportunity to become more contextualized and relevant. The Protestant churches—Methodist, Baptist, Anglican, and Pentecostal—found a way to respond and be faithful.³⁰ Between 1983 and 1992 these groups organized theological consultations and shared their reflections and challenges in books, forums, and seminars.³¹ Dow Kirkpatrick, Methodist executive with the Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church in the United States, published a book in 1988 with a selection of essays on the “rereading of Protestant faith in Latin America today.” Its topics included sanctification, biblical interpretation, Christology, the priesthood of all believers, the Trinity, the relevancy of Protestant theology to Latin America, and a new ecumenical vision of “the struggle for life.”³²

The Ecumenical Council of Churches of Cuba organized a consultation in Matanzas, inviting the Protestant denominations that had established the missionary work in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century to reflect on the “Missionary Heritage in Cuba.” This consultation was a time to examine, to ponder, and to engage in honest criticism and constructive dialogue about relationships. It was also a time to heal and to reconcile.³³

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 205-225.

²⁸ Carmelo E. Álvarez, *El papel de la iglesia en América Latina: Una introducción a la crisis del protestantismo y al desafío misionero del continente*, CLAI, Oaxtepec 1978, 173-192.

²⁹ Carmelo E. Álvarez, *Una iglesia en diáspora*, 87-89.

³⁰ Carmelo E. Álvarez, “Latin American Protestantism (1969-1978),” in *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities*, ed. Sergio Torres and John Eagleson, 103-106.

³¹ This process of organizing consultations was sponsored by the Ecumenical Research Department in San Jose, Costa Rica, through a program called Protestant Traditions in Latin America under the coordination of José Duque and Carmelo E. Álvarez. The process was shared with leaders of the different traditions with the participation of prominent theologians from those traditions. The following books were published as part of the program:

José Duque, ed., *La tradición protestante en la teología latinoamericana, primer intento: Lectura de la tradición Metodista* (San Jose, Costa Rica: DEI, 1983).

By the end of the century the National Council of Churches in the United States called a missiology consultation in San Jose, Costa Rica, entitled "Hope and Justice for All in the Americas: Discerning God's Mission."

*If Panama [Panama Congress, 1916] was witness to a monologue by mission boards, in San José [Missiology Consultation, 1998] there was an effort to create dialogue by expanding the circle of interlocutors...In San José we helped one another recognize ourselves as co-participants in God's mission.*³⁴

Conclusions

Since its arrival in Latin America and the Caribbean in the early nineteenth century, the liberal missionary movement, represented by the mainline denominations in the United States, faced a crucial challenge: the search for a regional identity and mission. The pressing task was to affirm a heritage (roots) and look for a promising destiny (future). This ongoing search for meaning, vision, and hope has received a variety of interpretations by theologians and church leaders.

The missions of the liberal Protestant churches in Latin America faced serious obstacles from their inception: the church came from the United States divided, which often made the church a divisive force. The tension between the church's divided history and mission, along with the struggle to create an awareness and relevant responses to the socio-economic, political, and cultural challenges in the conflicting circumstances of Latin America and the Caribbean, complicated relationships between different churches and church organizations. Church leaders became convinced of the necessity for mission and unity as visible signs of a sharing in God's mission in the coming of the kingdom. Ecumenical organiza-

Jorge Pixley, ed., *La mujer en la construcción de la iglesia: Una perspectiva bautista desde América Latina y el Caribe* (San Jose, Costa Rica: DEI, 1986).

Jorge Pixley, ed., *Hacia una fe evangélica latinoamericanista: Una perspectiva bautista* (San Jose, Costa Rica: DEI, 1988).

Ashton Jacinto Brooks, ed., *Eclesiología: Presencia Anglicana en la Región Central de América* (San Jose, Costa Rica: DEI, 1990).

Carmelo E. Álvarez, ed., *Pentecostalismo y liberación: Una experiencia latinoamericana* (San Jose, Costa Rica: DEI-CEPLA, 1992).

³² Dow Kirkpatrick, ed., *Faith Born in the Struggle for Life: A Rereading of Protestant Faith in Latin America Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1988).

³³ Rafael Cepeda, ed., *La herencia misionera en Cuba* (San Jose, Costa Rica: DEI, 1984).

³⁴ Oscar L. Bolioli, ed., *Hope and Justice for All in the Americas: Discerning God's Mission* (New York: Friendship Press, 1998), 1-2.

tions, regional and national conferences, consultations, and continental assemblies were attempts to promote a conciliar process and to create conditions for a visible manifestation of mission and unity. The founding of the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI) in 1978 was a concrete institutional expression of a visible ecumenical manifestation of mission and unity. The ecumenical vocation and the missional commitment were intertwined.

The liberal missionary model was influenced by the ideology of an expansive “liberal project” promoted by the United States and Europe. The goals and strategies of businessmen and missionaries coincided in implementing progressive, democratic elements within a larger liberal-democratic project.

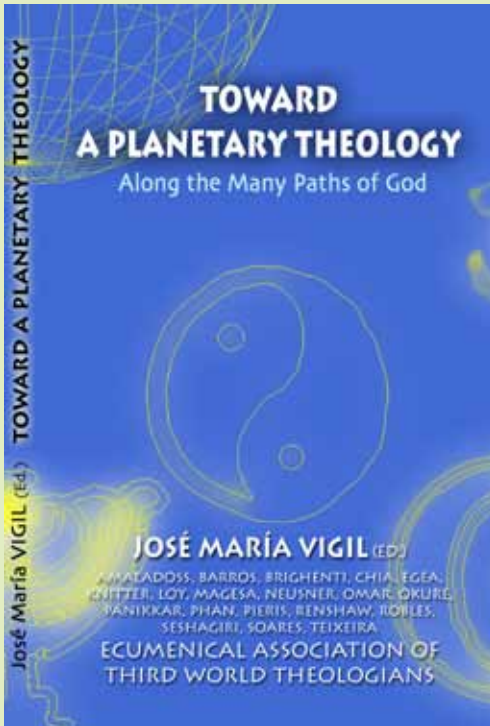
The liberal missionary movement had to rise to the challenge of becoming an incarnated Protestantism both viable and relevant in the historical conditions of Latin America and the Caribbean. The church’s search for identity and mission led to a view of the church as a new diaspora, the people of God sharing in God’s mission.

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