

Identity and Identification: The Latin American Protestant¹ Church

Author: Paul Davies, Tutor in Theology of Mission, All Nations Christian College

Introduction

The church is sent into the world with a distinct message: the gospel. It is called to announce and live out that message in the context where it is placed. The nature of the gospel, however, precludes the possibility of shouting the message from a safe distance; the message must be incarnated. This means that the messenger must live out the message and identify with the hearers. This raises the question of the tension between identity and identification, which is a problem that always faces the church in mission. The more the church emphasises its distinct identity the more it is in danger of losing its ability to identify with the world into which it is sent. On the other hand, the more it identifies itself with the world, the more it faces the danger of losing its distinctiveness. Jürgen Moltmann calls this the tension between identity and relevance; José Míguez Bonino calls it the tension between the Christ reference and the universal reference. Whatever it is called it seems to sum up well the problem that has faced the Latin American Protestant Church throughout its history.

To Roman Catholics, the Protestant church seems foreign: an Anglo-Saxon invader, a usurper, and even a rapacious wolf stealing the Roman Catholic flock. This foreignness is accentuated by the strong Anglo-Saxon missionary heritage of the churches and has led to Latin American Protestants asking some hard questions. What does it mean to be a Latin American Protestant? Does being Protestant mean to become a quasi Anglo-Saxon and lose 'latinness'? Can there be Latin American Protestant identity, whilst maintaining identification? If so, what does it look like? How does our identity affect the mission of our churches? How does our concept of mission affect our identity?

The Brazilian Presbyterian theologian and historian Rubem Alves said:

The historian is someone who recovers forgotten memories and disseminates them as a sacrament to those who have lost the memory. Indeed, what finer community sacrament is there than the memories of a common past, punctuated by the existence of pain, of sacrifice and of hope? To recover in order to disseminate. The historian is not an archaeologist of memories. The historian is a sower of visions and hopes (Alves 1981: 363).

This article will describe some elements of the history of Latin American Protestantism to illustrate the problem and perhaps, thereby, identify visions and hopes for the future.

Identity dominates and identification stays away

The entrance of Protestantism into Latin America coincided with the revolutions that brought Latin America its freedom from colonial powers. Aristocratic elites, born in Latin America (but educated in Europe) were inspired by the philosophical ideas of John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire as well as the revolutions in the United States (1776) and France (1789). They wanted to trade freely with expanding economies such as Great Britain and the Netherlands; something denied them by the laws of the Spanish Crown. They rose up against the colonial powers to claim these rights of liberty and individual freedom.

The Protestant missionaries entering Latin America at the same time were influenced by the so-called 'Second Great Awakening' or 'Second Evangelical Awakening' (c. 1790-1840) and later by the 'Mid-Century Prayer Revival' (c. 1858-1880s). Both these phenomena emphasized personal, individual conversion; the responsibility of every individual to make a personal response to the gospel. Along with the individual response, these revivals also contained a strong sense of social concern.

There has been much debate over the relationship between these liberal, bourgeois revolutions, and the entrance of Protestantism. Some have denied all correlation, declaring the mission work as nothing more than a coincidence. Others have propounded various forms of 'conspiracy theory,' seeing Protestantism as the religious arm of Anglo-Saxon expansionism. The answer, however, seems to lie in what Jean Pierre Bastian has called the 'associative hypothesis'. There was converging interest rather than cooperation. The Political Liberals were fighting for individual rights to trade under political liberalism, free from Spanish interference and the Protestant missionaries were preaching a gospel of individual salvation free from the mediation of the Roman Catholic Church. From the beginning, therefore, Protestantism was identified with the anti-Catholic, anti-colonialist, liberal project of the Creole elites. During the nineteenth century, the Protestant churches grew slowly numerically, but due to their association with the political elites, their enterprising commercial attitudes, and their involvement in education and social work, they gained an influence far beyond what their numbers promised.

In this period, identity reigned; identification with the context was not prevalent. The missionaries emphasised the uniqueness of their gospel, the importance of individual salvation from individual sin, unmediated by the Roman Catholic Church. There can be no doubt that their message had resonance with the bourgeois elites fighting for freedom from Spain and Portugal, but it did not engage with society and culture. The message they preached extracted people from the world in order to place them in the church. The missionaries educated and freed the people from the ignorance of superstition [in the Roman Catholic Church] and ignorance of subjugation [to the colonial powers].

Identity affirmed and identification investigated

The first half of the Twentieth century saw a slow 'latinisation' of the Protestant churches. Three conferences on mission in Latin America were held in Panama (1916), Montevideo (1925) and Havana (1929). The Panama conference was held in English and 15% of the delegates were of Latin origin (Braga 1917: 87-88). By Havana the Latin Americans had found their voice. This however, caused a good deal of conflict. Pablo Deiros recounts. 'The nationals complained of the dominance and control of the North American missionaries. And at the same time, the missionaries expressed doubt as to the capacity of the nationals to manage the work, given their voluble, rebellious and revolutionary spirit' (Deiros 1992: 720). The first half of the twentieth century was characterized by a continuing dependence on foreign missionaries at the same time as a developing Latin American leadership.

The late nineteen forties and nineteen fifties saw the Latin American Protestant Church begin to investigate how, in its mission in Latin America, it could identify with the world into which it was sent. The first CELA² was an important event. The conference took place in Buenos Aires (1949). Most of the major speakers were Latin Americans and the themes reflected their interest. These themes were: 'The Latin American Reality and the Presence of Protestantism,' 'The Message and Mission of Protestantism in Latin America,' and 'A Fundamental Plan of Evangelical (Evangélica) action' (CELA I 1949). The first of these themes demonstrates how church leaders were realising that, in order to carry its mission in Latin America, the church needed to understand the context into which it was sent; moreover

it needed to understand its own role in the context—its identification. The second theme emphasised the uniqueness of the message of the church and its mission—identity. The third theme reveals a constant in Latin American theology—action.

Identification dominates and identity fades

The sixties was the decade that saw the radicalisation of Latin American Protestant theology. The second CELA (CELA II), held in Lima, Peru, at the beginning of the nineteen sixties closely followed the lead of Buenos Aires (1949). Deiros says that it made, 'a call to evangelisation and the involvement in the human problem of the continent' (Deiros 1992:766). The conference's emphasis was as an affirmation of the faith and mission of the Church. It 'moved towards an exploration of the theological content of the Gospel, of the reality of the human being and the Latin American people' (Deiros 1992:766).

However, a consultation, taking place at the same time thirty kilometres away, laid the foundations for a radicalisation of Latin American theology and a complete reversal of identity and identification. Church and Society in Latin America (ISAL)³, which Orlando Costas described as 'the most consistently radical Protestant ecumenical organization in Latin America' (Costas 1976: 199), met to respond 'to the growing concern that is being manifested in Latin American Protestant Christianity' and 'to discover the best way of giving testimony in the midst of a situation of social change and constant transformation' (ISAL I 1961: 12). The idea of the consultation was to (1) bring together and exchange information about the social work already being done by the churches (2) to discover how they could help each other in the future (3) to search for the meaning of these social changes from a Christian perspective and the responsibility towards them and finally (4) to firm up a common strategy for study and future action (ISAL 1961: 12). This demonstrates how identification was increasing.

During the sixties ISAL, moved increasingly towards a theology of revolution and a socialist option. In a meeting of ISAL in Chile (1966), mission was described as 'humanisation' (ISAL II: 11). By the third continental assembly (Uruguay 1967), ISAL was so disillusioned with the church that 'the only way out was to become auxiliaries of the revolutionary forces and to work principally towards the development of a revolutionary consciousness among popular core groups' (Nuñez 1985: 70): identification dominated. Much later Tomas Gutiérrez commented that 'the conservatives lobby for change via development and the radicals via a violent revolution' (Gutiérrez 1995: 53). Mission, was taking part in revolution. Identification was swallowing up identity.

It is clear how the work of ISAL has deeply influenced the development of the theology of liberation. Even before the publication of Gustavo Gutiérrez' book, ISAL was calling for an almost complete identification with the world. Sadly, space does not allow the investigation of how Protestant liberation theologians such as José Míguez Bonino and Rubem Alves struggled to maintain identity in this complete identification of ISAL.

Identity and identification in tension

The formation of the Latin American Theological Fraternity (FTL)⁴ in Bolivia (1970) opened up an international and interdenominational forum for theological reflection. Student leaders such as C. Samuel Escobar and C. René Padilla wanted to think through the implications of the gospel in Latin America and because they emerged from the Inter Varsity movement, their emphasis was biblical study and active mission.

Valdir Steuernagel commented:

We are and we want to be Evangelicals. And as Evangelicals we are and want to be Latin Americans. At that point and in that context, it was urgently realized that, being Evangelicals, we should seek for a theology of incarnation that would establish the guidelines for a dialogue with the situation of suffering and oppression that Latin America lived in (Steuernagel 1992: 4).

The FTL organised various consultations on mission in Latin America before its second continental wide conference (CLADE II, 1979). In the context of the terrible oppression and military governments of the 1970s CLADE II sent a letter to the Christians of Latin America. Giving thanks for the Evangelical heritage of Latin America, it commits itself to faithfulness to the Gospel and the task of evangelisation, in a continent full of physical suffering and moral degradation, socially, politically and religiously. It declares 'although many have come to Christ, there is still a lack of unity and an indifference towards the physical and spiritual needs of our neighbour' (CLADE II 1979: xix-xx). Gutiérrez says 'These calls of CLADE II were repetitive for some sectors but the more conservative evangelicals took them to be leftist positions' (Gutiérrez 1992: 55). This reveals how, in its attempts to maintain the tension between identity and identification, the FTL was taking criticism from both the radical and conservative elements in the Latin American Protestant Church.

The FTL, however, has continued to attempt to be a forum for dialogue between opposing sectors of the Latin American Protestant Church. The most important forum was CLADE III, which took place in Quito, Ecuador under the title, 'The whole Gospel, for all People, from Latin America.' There were 1080 participants from more than twenty-four countries. There can be no doubt that CLADE III was the most representative of all Evangelical assemblies that had taken place up to that point.

The product of CLADE III, 'The Quito Declaration,' was divided into the three elements of the title of the conference 'The Whole Gospel,' 'From Latin America,' 'For All Peoples.' According to the document, the Scriptures witness to the whole gospel in the concrete acts of God in history (I.A), in the goodness of creation (I.B), forgiveness and reconciliation in Christ (I.C) and in the formation of the community of the Spirit (I.D.). The gospel is the gospel of the kingdom that is both present and future (I.E) in which the church in this present age is called to live in justice and power of the Spirit (I.F). This Gospel is to be preached by a church with roots in the history (II.A) and culture of Latin America (II.B): specifically by a culturally diverse evangelical church, with roots in America (North and South), Africa, Asia and Europe as well as in the Reformation (II.C). It is to preach this Gospel within and from within the context of a continent which has suffered oppression, civil war, corruption and neo-Liberal policies (II.D). This means that the Church is called to respond faithfully to the gospel in the practice of justice, which is a consequence of the gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation, affirming and promoting life, which is denied by sin, unjust structures and interest groups (II.E). The Christian also has a responsibility to live in the society, participating in civil society as a responsible and concerned citizen (II.F). This gospel is a universal gospel (III.A.), it is integral (III.C) and is to be proclaimed incarnationally (III.E) and urgently, (III.F) by a church which is missionary by its very nature (III.B), and conscious of its responsibilities to the world (III.D) (See CLADE III 1992:779-795).

The 'Quito Declaration' demonstrates the degree to which the FTL has achieved the balance between the maintenance of a particular Christian identity and a deep identification with Latin America and the world. According to Tomás Gutiérrez, 'The FTL has won a space; open to dialogue and to the challenges that arise today in Latin America' (Gutiérrez 1992: 58). And Míguez Bonino reflects, 'There are different movements, people and groups that are trying to reflect upon these issues and it is important that they have the opportunity to meet together,

to all of them to learn from all and to continue to provide our churches with the necessary instruments for her mission in a promising but difficult time that confronts us' (Míguez Bonino 1993: 161-164).

Conclusion

The tension between identity and identification will continue to be a challenge to the Latin American Protestant Church in its mission. The temptation to withdraw into itself; to stay inside the church building and sing its choruses; to enjoy fellowship and ignore the world outside; to affirm identity at the expense of identification with God's world is the greatest danger for the Protestant church in Latin America today. Radical Christians also face the opposite danger: to throw themselves into social and political projects and leave the church behind; to commit themselves totally to a liberative project without reflecting upon the meaning of the gospel to such a project; to affirm identification with the world at the expense of the uniqueness of the gospel must also be avoided. The FTL has pointed a way to maintain the tension creatively.

Notes

¹ Most Latin Americans do not use the word Protestant, preferring the word *evangélico*. *Evangélico* is broadly equivalent to Protestant. Therefore, ecumenical Christians as well as Conservatives are considered to be *evangélicos*. The divisions expressed by the Anglo-Saxon differentiation between 'evangelical' and 'ecumenical' do exist in Latin America but this has not been articulated in terminology.

² Congreso Evangélico Latinoamericano.

³ Iglesia y sociedad en América Latina.

⁴ Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana.

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Biography of the Author

Paul Davies is Tutor in Theology of Mission at All Nations Christian College. With his wife, Wilma, he spent nine years in Latin America training Argentinean and other Latin American missionaries and mission leaders for inter-cultural work. He is in the last stages of doctoral studies on the missionary theology of Jose Miguez Bonino, an Argentinean Methodist.

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