

THE CHALLENGE FACING THE PROTESTANT COMMUNITY

IN LATIN AMERICA

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The presence of the Protestant community is one of the new factors shaping up the Latin American panorama of today. Whereas at the beginning of the century there were no more than 50,000 Protestants, today there are close to ten million believers in a population of two hundred million. Even though this represents only 5% of the population, and the percentage varies from country to country, the growth in some of the countries has been nothing short of phenomenal. This is the case of the Protestant communities in Brazil, Chile, and Puerto Rico. Even if the growth continues at a slower pace, it is expected that by the end of the century there will be close to sixty million Protestants in that part of the world. The numbers by themselves are impressive but tell us nothing of the composition of this Protestant community and the challenges that it faces today.

Some Protestant communities in Latin America owe their existence to migrations from the Old World. By and large, however, these groups have not tried to spread the Gospel among the population. The brunt of the missionary effort has been carried ~~on~~ by the so-called historical denominations: Congrega-

tional, Baptist, Lutheran, Disciples of Christ, Anglican, etc. In the last generation or so a significant role has been played by the wrongly so-called "non-historical" denominations: the Pentecostals, the Assemblies of God and other groups. These latter groups have been very aggressive in evangelism and very successful in reaching the lower classes. They have tended also to be more indigenous in practice, if not in theology.

The main emphasis of these missionary groups has been on personal evangelism. The message has centered on Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation and there has been a marked stress on personal piety and purity. According to this approach, those who come to Christ were to renounce the world and come together in the gathered community. The historical denominations have also made outstanding contributions in the fields of education and health, bringing the influence of Protestant Christianity into the sphere of government and into public education and welfare. Many are the decorations that missionaries have received from the governments of various Latin American countries for their contribution to the education and health of the people.

This very brief survey of the past will help us to see things in perspective. The least we can say is that the Protestant community in Latin America is numerically strong, evangelistically oriented, and in many areas ably led by nationals of the various countries. But this is not the whole story of Protestant Christianity in Latin America. There are serious problems and challenges facing the churches. Let me briefly analyze ~~three~~<sup>two</sup> of them.

I. The revolutionary situation in Latin America.

It is a commonplace to say that Latin America is in a state of turmoil today as never before. A revolution in itself is nothing new. There have been many and in some countries dozens of revolutions since the days of independence. But the revolutions of today are different. In the old days a revolution merely meant a change of hands at the helm of government. The social, economic, and cultural institutions, as such, remained untouched. Today this has entirely changed. The revolutionary forces rampant in all of Latin America aim at changing the power structures of the nations, taking away the political power from the rich land owner, from the foreign corporation, from the church (even if this is the Catholic church). They also <sup>want</sup> ~~aim~~ to distribute the wealth of the nation, giving the lower classes a chance for a better life and better opportunities in education. In different countries the revolution is in different stages. Mexico was the first Latin American country to experience revolution in the manner outlined above. In Cuba the revolution has taken a communist orientation. In Puerto Rico it has taken place and is still being carried on within the framework of the political institutions of the United States. The most recent example is Chile. It deserves close attention because the political movement that has gained power in Chile derives its social and economic principles from the social doctrines of the Catholic church. It is patterned after similar movements in Europe and calls itself the Christian Democratic Party. Its leaders are largely Roman Catholics but the party itself is non-confessional.

Its leader, Eduardo Frei, explains Christian democracy as such: <sup>Follow</sup>

"~~The central tenet of~~ Christian Democracy looks to the ~~crisis of~~ a world ~~exhausted,~~ to the death of paternalism, and to the birth of a civilization of work and solidarity with man as its center, rather than the pursuit of monetary gain that pervaded the bourgeois society. And its inspiration is that this new era in history and the new social condition will be based on Christian values and concepts of Christianity." Christian democracy for Frei means a breaking of the established order. "The achievement of power no longer means for us," says Frei, "as it does for the people of the United States, simply slight variations in political structures, but rather a change in the entire social structure, requiring new orientations for family, education, state and man." Frei is critical of the United States but is not anti-American. He sees communism not just as a political movement but as a system that explains to man in coherent and understandable terms his own existence. For this reason it appeals to the intellectuals and the better-off proletarian sectors, rather than to the rural uneducated mass. The answer given to this challenge is usually weak. He adds:

"The anti-communisms of fear, of preservation of 'order,' and of forces, manifested in military coups, are doomed to failure and are constantly in rout. They have nothing to say to youth or the people. This explains the frustration resulting from regimes created to impose 'order.' Again, to ground all policy on the concept of 'free enterprise' is almost absurd. This does not satisfy anyone's soul or intelligence. Furthermore, to continue speaking of freedom and democracy to people

deprived of land, housing, schools or opportunities is practically useless. They are words wasted. What is important is to point the way to a true democracy and a true freedom." (Quoted from George C. Lodge, "Paternalism Must Die," Boston Globe, Jan. 2, 1966.)

The above survey of the revolutionary movements in Latin America makes crystal clear the situation which the Protestant churches face. Can churches nurtured in an otherworldly view of life and puritanical ethics, and a concept of the church as the gathered community, be able to speak meaningfully to the challenge posed by the need to change the social structure? Is Christian democracy the only alternative? There are many Catholics and of course even more Protestants who doubt the ultimate political efficacy of a system of government patterned on so-called Christian principles. Is it better to work on the basis of a pluralistic society? The churches are faced with a real dilemma.

Fortunately there is some creative thinking being done both at the Evangelical Seminary at Río Piedras, Puerto Rico, and at the Union Seminary in Buenos Aires. An attempt is being made at these institutions to relate Christian faith to the revolutionary atmosphere dominating the Latin American scene. However, up to the present moment the effort is in its initial stages and it will be a few years before it reaches down to grass-roots levels.

## II. The Renewal of the Roman Catholic Church.

Until just three years ago, the missionary efforts of the Protestant churches in Latin America were conditioned by the

strong opposition of the Roman Catholic Church. Consequently, Protestant preaching has been characterized by a strong anti-Catholic polemic. There are justifiable reasons for this approach. The Roman church holds a position of privilege in many of these countries and used that position to harass and even to persecute Protestants. This situation has now been totally reversed, at least in principle, since the Second Vatican Council. Since then the Roman Church in Latin America, as in other parts of the world, is seriously attempting to carry on a dialogue with Protestants. A few examples will illustrate the trend.

In conversation with the abbot of the monastery of Montserrat, about 25 miles from Barcelona--a Benedictine monastery that dates back to the ninth century and is perched on a high mountain range that juts about 3,000 feet above sea level--I asked him point-blank what he thought of the missionary effort of the Protestant churches in Latin America. He answered that Protestants and Catholics in Latin America, as well as in other parts of the world, should not consider themselves as enemies but as companions in a common task. This is an amazing statement, coming from a Spanish Roman Catholic. I should hasten to add that, although the Roman Catholic Church in Spain remains to a large extent under the dominion of the conservative forces, there is a strong movement of renewal. In this movement, the Abbey of Montserrat is playing an important role. It has become the center for liturgical renewal, for serious biblical studies, and for an ecumenical dialogue in depth.

Father José María González Ruiz, a Spanish Roman Catholic theologian of strong evangelica l "bent", who played a significant role in the Second Vatican Council, sees the development of the Protestant and Catholic dialogue in the whole world in even bolder terms. He thinks that within a generation or so the Protestant and Catholic dialogue will have advanced to the point where both traditions will change many of the positions formerly considered unalterable and will join in a common witness to the world. This does not necessarily imply organic union, but it may. Furthermore, he is envisioning a university somewhere in Latin A merica, where both Protestants and Catholics would teach Bible, theology, and similar subjects in the same faculty of theology. This is bold thinking, to say the least. Just two weeks ago I received a letter from him in which he informed me that he had been invited to be a visiting professor this coming academic year at the University of Puerto Rico. He will conduct a seminar on "Cosmovisión Cristiana"--Christian world-view.

Here you have an example of the challenge that the renewal of the Catholic church poses for the Protestant community. What are we going to do about this? Can we afford to retreat into our neat and cozy theological and ecclesiastical formulations? The issue is crucial. They come to us not a s enemies, not as possessing all the truth, but to invite us to discuss seriously the matters that unite and separate us. Furthermore, they come in the spirit of love, in humility, willing to hear, willing to learn, willing to change. The amazing thing is that many of the positions that the Catholics are now assuming have long been the domain of the Protestants. Now that they have taken the Protestant position

on the relationship between church and state, now that they have rejected triumphalism, now that some theologians among them accept the doctrine of justification by faith--although not in the same terms as it was formulated by the reformers--, now what? What happens when a Catholic priest tells you bluntly that he thinks that baptism of children should be eliminated, that the church should go back to the practice of adult baptism? Mind you, this is not the opinion of the Roman Church but this priest has the audacity to express his views and to think that the subject should be discussed by the church. What can a Baptist say in this context? I am not for a minute suggesting that there are not many areas in which differences remain and are almost unsurmountable: (mariolatry, apostolic succession). But the climate of opinion has changed. The spirit is new. It is indeed a challenge to our Christian commitment.

It is clear from this new development within the Catholic Church, that Protestant Christianity in Latin America has to do a lot of serious theological and Biblical thinking to come to grips with the new situation. One of the crucial areas is the Bible. Now the Catholic church is giving a prominent place to the Bible both in seminary training and in the daily piety of the people. The Roman Catholic Church in Mexico has organized a Bible Society and in the year 1963 circulated more than 300,000 copies of the Scriptures. Right now an even larger and more ambitious project is going on in Barcelona, Spain. A new translation of the New Testament from the Greek into Spanish, that was being made by the Herder Publishing Company, has become the first ecumenical venture in the Spanish language in the translation and



revision of the Scriptures. The project is the joint product of the interest of the Roman Catholic bishops of Spanish America in the wider distribution of the Scriptures and of the ecumenical vision of the Protestant monastic community of Taizé, France. The community of Taizé has promised to raise enough funds to buy the first million copies and has requested that the new version be an ecumenical enterprise at the revision stage. The Catholics on their part accepted this condition. Last summer a group of Biblical scholars, four Catholics and two Protestants, started the revision. Of the two Protestants, one is from Spain; the other, the one who speaks to you, represented the Protestantism of Spanish America. Right now the project continues in Barcelona and it seems that it will be finished by the end of March of this year. Just last week I received a letter from the leader of the revision team almost imploring me to go back to continue in the project. Dr. Gonzalo Báez Camargo of Mexico, who we were hoping would substitute for me, has not been able to go. In spite of my serious responsibilities at Harvard (I am writing my thesis), I am giving serious consideration to this request.

I have mentioned these projects because they pose questions for the Protestants of Latin America and for the missionary societies. Some Catholic scholars are envisioning an ecumenical translation in the future which would become the Bible of all Spanish-speaking Christians. Is this a possibility? What role would the Bible Societies play in this sphere? We must not forget, of course, that it was the Protestant Bible Societies that were the pioneers in these areas and had the field to themselves up to the present day. But we must ask: Do we have to modify the rules of

the game as it has been played in the field of Bible translation, revision, and distribution? I don't even dare to suggest any course of action, both because I do not have a voice in running the Bible Societies, and because I am ignorant of the intricacies of the situation. However, I must say that this is one area which will require serious attention on the part of the Bible Societies and the Protestant churches.

These are just two of the issues that confront the Protestant churches in Latin America. Time fails me to mention others like the role that the Bible should play in the life of our churches and the problem that the presence of so many denominations creates for an effective witness.

Let me conclude with a word of personal testimony. I was for eleven years a pastor of Baptist churches (nine in Puerto Rico and two in the United States). They were years in contact with raw humanity: the humanity of the slum area, of the upcoming Puerto Rican middle class, of the proud New England Yankee. Through these layers of humanity and culture I have seen the Gospel of Christ breaking -- creating life out of deadness, breaking the power of sin, creating bonds of peace and reconciliation, judging culture yet speaking through culture. Because this has been my experience, I can only say with Paul: "Woe unto me if I do not preach the Gospel." I intend to carry on this same ministry at the Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico, employing the tools of historical scholarship but at the same time being aware that the God who spoke and revealed Himself in the past is still carrying on his purpose of reconciliation and peace.