"INTEGRITY OF MISSION IN THE LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL: BEARING THE WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT" PERSPECTIVES FROM LATIN AMERICA

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INTRODUCTION:

The purpose of this paper is to explore the meaning of The integrity of mission in the context of Latin America with a particular focus on culture, religions, the poor and Christian mission.

By the integrity of mission, we understand the content of the message of the Gospel, the story of redemption and liberation through Jesus Christ our Lord and savior. It also refers to the way God has carried out his mission on behalf of his world including humankind since he established his creation. It has to do with the active presence of God not only sustaining his creation but transforming it as a process of redemption and liberation of personal, collective and structural sin, through Jesus Christ, which will be completed when he returns again.[1]

The above vision of the Gospel and the mission of God implies that God has been calling and forming a people for himself, the body of Christ, the church, which is central to the mission of God. This people of God, actually is made up of a very diverse multitude of peoples who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, of many different tongues, cultures, ethnic groups through out the world[2]

For the church and Christians participating and fulfilling God's mission, is also a way of believing and acting with the empowering of the Holy Spirit[3], loving God and neighbor, under the model of Jesus Christ, the incarnated God, father, son and Holy Spirit.

As there is a cosmic and universal expression of the gospel and the people of God there is also a concrete, localized expression of it. Therefore in this paper we will explore the theme of our conference from the context of Latin America and the people of God in this continent.

1. THE INTEGRITY OF MISSION AND CULTURE

By culture we understand the everyday lifestyle of peoples everywhere which includes world view, religion, values, social and economic activities and relationships, as well as patterns of behavior which have been learned from the time one is born! It includes the web of social relationships that one has established in one's society[4]. Culture is a dynamic phenomenon as it is changing continually due to internal factors as well as to external ones.

Our discussion on culture must of necessity make reference to the global nature of contemporary societies. By globalization in its cultural dimension we may refer to the view that *"the entire planet is being wired into music, movies, news, television and other cultural products that originate primarily in the film and recording studios of the United States. Local*

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[1] New International Version, Study Bible, 1985 Zondervan Corporation. Acts 1:11.
[2] New International Version, Study Bible, 1985 Zondervan Corporation. Revelations 7: 9 – 10.
[3] New International Version, Study Bible, 1985 Zondervan Corporation. Acts 1: 8
[4] Lausane Committee for World Evangelization, El evangelio y la cultura. Informe de la consulta de Willowbank, Buenos Aires, 1978, p. 5.

cultures are uprooted and replaced with universal cultural symbols, leading to an ever greater uniformity of personal tastes and lifestyles"[5].

In today's globalized market driven world, there are forces that want to homogenize cultures but at the same time in this postmodern era there are forces that affirm locality and particularity of cultures. In the words of Robert Schriter:

> *"Homogenizing as these systems might be, they do not end up homogenizing local cultures altogether. It is increasingly evident that local cultures receive the elements of the hyper-culture and reinterpret them in some measure*[6]*"*

This dynamic, dialectical nature of today's socio-cultural reality is also experienced in Latin America. An example of this in our continent is the revival of Indian cultures and political movements such as the Quichuas in Ecuador and their counterparts in Bolivia and Peru. As it is known the Indian movement in Ecuador was fundamental in the removal from office of two presidents: Jamild Mahuad de Witt and Gustavo Novoa. Similarly in Bolivia former president Lozada was forced to resign. In Peru the Aymara population in Puno, as of this writing[7] has been appraising and have toppled down local authorities and are claiming not only the attention of the state but also the possibility of establishing their own nation and real access to political power. The apparent nonresistant and passive aymara, have "awaken" and are roaring for justice. The globalized Peruvian state has to learn to deal with the affirmation and revitalization of local ethnicities and cultures.

The integrity of mission recognizes culture as the vehicle used by God to interact with humans as well as the vehicle to carry out his mission in this world. Culture is also the vehicle in which humans can realize themselves as well as render homage and worship God. Therefore as part of creation, we can see in cultures the evidence of God's love, presence and dynamic involvement. Culture or cultures are a space where the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ should, without loosing its integrity, strive to feel at home[8].

Christians in Latin America, particularly evangelical christians, need to revaluate their view and relationship with our cultures so that we can affirm and revalue all that is good and positive in our cultures. This has begun to happen in several population sectors such as the Pentecostal popular sectors[9] as well as Indian evangelical peoples[10]. For Mortimer Arias[11], an Uruguayan theologian, the Pentecostals are the most contextualized form of protestant Christianity.

Just as culture is a vehicle to worship God, it is also a vehicle in need of redemption, particularly its unjust structures. Therefore the Gospel not only aims at feeling at home in culture but it also seeks its transformation and in this sense is always a pilgrim in culture[12]. The church must learn to live with this tension.

The spread of Christianity in Latin America has often taken the Christ against culture model, following Richard Niebuhr's scheme[13]. We have seen this both in Roman Catholic as well as

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[5] Ramachandra, Vinoth. CMS Annual Sermon 2003: *Global Society: Challenges for Christian Mission*. P. 5
[6] Schreiter, Robert J.; *The New Catholicity: theology between the global and the local*. Orbis books, NY 2000:10
[7] May 2004
[8] Walls, Andrew "The Gospel as liberator and prisoner of culture" in *The Missionary movement in Christian History*, Orbis books, NY 1996
[9] Arias, Mortimer; "La contextualización del Evangelio: Entre el acomodamiento y la confrontación" Artículos Claves, Apoyo No. 79. ND.
[10] Paredes, Tito; "La nueva presencia evangélica Indígena" en *El Evangelio: Un tesoro en vasijas de barro*. Colección FTL 8 y 9. Buenos Aires, 2000: 183.
[11] Arias, Mortimer; Opposite cit
[12] Walls, Andrew; Opposite cit.
[13] Neibuhr, Richard: *Christ and Culture*, New York: Harper and Row (Harper Colophon Books), 1975.

evangelical Christianity. When the first Spanish conquerors arrived to Latin America, they related to the American Indians as if they had no souls or as if they were subhuman beings. For example according to Hanke:

> *"Antonio de Villasante expressed the general opinion of the colonists when he emphatically deposed that neither Indian men nor women know how to govern themselves as adequately as the rudest Spaniard. If allowed to run free, he declared, the Indians would revert to their former habits of idleness, nakedness, dancing, eating spiders and snakes, patronzing witch doctors, drunkenness, improvidence, and gluttony. Another colonist, Lucas Vasques de Ayllón, concluded that it was far better they should become slave men (hombres siervos) than remain free beasts (bestias libres)"*[14].

When the Spaniards conquered the American Indians, gathered them into towns, disregarding the diversity of ethnic groups and languages, thus contributing to their ethnocide. Spanish culture was imposed as superior to Indian cultures. Fortunately there were friars who stood up prophetically to defend the lives and cultures of our Indian ancestors.[15]

In Latin America many of the protestant missionaries who came to share the Gospel, not only were ignorant of our ways, but often saw the Latin American cultures as spaces where only sinfulness and evil reigned, therefore many aspects of our culture were rejected and condemned; for example our diverse music, musical instruments, values, customs and norms that did not contradict the integrity of mission and the gospel were rejected. If these cultural aspects would have been considered as arena of God's action and witness they could have enhanced and enriched Latin American cultures and prepared the ground for a more rooted and contextualized expression of the Gospel.

But not only the foreign missionary had a negative attitude toward our cultures, also many Latin American pastors, church leaders and missionaries had also the view that Christ was against our cultures. The four protestant commandments were: *"Do not drink, do not smoke, do not go to movies and do not dance"*. For years Latin American protestants have made strong efforts to keep these commandments. Of these three, the injunction not to dance attempted particularly against our cultural identity. Latin Americans are known and famous for loving parties and dancing. Evangelicals were not permitted these idiosyncrasies and we were robbed of expressing our identity more fully. However this has begun to change and there are signs of hope and new patterns of Latin evangelical behavior more in tune with Latin cultures[16].

Latin American evangelicals also had a good share in spreading this view and praxis that Christ was against Indian culture. Just like the Spaniards in the XVI century, so Spanish speaking evangelicals (mestizos) also looked down upon Indian peoples and cultures and expected Indians to become Hispanic to be true Christians[17]. Although much has been done to overcome these attitudes and praxis, we still have a ways to go.

Although there are sinful and demonic aspects to culture, we can not conclude that Christ is against culture. Therefore we need to develop a clear view of culture from scripture. One that sees God actively involve in his creation, in the cultures of his world and in the light of the

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[14] Hanke, Lewis: *All Mankind is one* Illinois, Northern Illinois University Press 1974: 9 – 10. (taken from the PhD. thesis of Rubén Paredes: *The Protestant Movement in Ecuador and Peru*, University Of California – Los Angeles: 1980: 67)

[15] Hanke, Lewis: *The Spanish struggle for justice in the conquest of America* Filadelfia, 1949.

[16] Paredes, Tito: "Con permiso para danza" 1º Simposio Internacional Historia del Protestantismo Evangélico en América Latina y El Caribe. Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos y Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana, Lima – Perú –Octubre, 2002

[17] Paredes, Tito; "La nueva presencia evangélica en Indígena" en *"El Evangelio: Un tesoro en vasijas de barro"*. Colección FTL 8 y 9. Buenos Aires, 2000: 183

transforming power of the gospel!! One that takes into account the interactions between the local and universal expressions of cultures and the gospel.

The experience of the early church in its dealings with the diverse cultures of their world provide for us valuable input for our current situation. We may summarize the following conclusions after examining particularly Acts 10 and 11 (The encounter of Peter and Cornelius); Acts 15 (the Jerusalem Council) and Acts 17 (Paul's encounter with Greek culture) among others[18]:

a) Salvation is only through faith in Jesus Christ; not one people or culture can claim monopoly over the gospel of Jesus Christ.

b) Salvation does not require of works or additional burdens.

c) When we live or communicate the Gospel among other cultures, often we do it imposing our culture or traditions that have little to do with the essence of the Gospel.

d) We must avoid communicating the Gospel in our cultural packages imposing it upon those we try to evangelize.

e) We must make the effort to break our cultural flower pots and try to only plant the seeds of the Gospel so that local, culturally indigenous plants are born and grown.

f) God manifests himself in all the peoples and cultures of the world, The missionary does not go to a tabula raza situation. God has already been there active and preparing the full manifestation of himself and his message. The missionary must be open to God's teaching through the culture or others.

g) The Gospel affirms all that is good in our cultures and confronts all that is evil, in our persons, families, relationships and structures of society.

h) The first chirstians were Jews who could be christians remaining culturally Jews, so did the Greek christians; and likewise all the peoples of the world can be christians remaining within their cultural settings. This applied to African, Asians , Latin Americans etc.

i) We also have the freedom in Christ to interact with discernment with the global realities of today's world and select what is reasonable for our own well being and those of our people.

2. THE INTEGRITY OF MISSION AND RELIGIONS

Gone are the days in which nonchristian religions, were considered totally depraved and without any possibility of expressing God's common grace or aspects of his general revelation. The treatment of religion from a christian biblical perspective in a way has to be similar to culture.

Cultures as well as religions are the arena of God's activity and presence as well as of sinfulness and evil. Just as there are aspects of culture that are in agreement with God's kingdom values so there are sinful and evil dimensions of religions that need the transforming power of the gospel.

There are elements in religion that may serve as bridges and connectors between the Gospel and the people who profess a given set of beliefs and practices. The clearest example we have of this bridge building connectors is Paul's relationship with the Greek religion in Acts 17. Paul inculturated the Gospel in Greek culture and to an extent in Greek religion finding the

[18] Paredes, Tito: "Evangelio y cultura en Nuevo Testamento" Ibid. Pag. 83 – 96.

connectors, bridges between the Greek pantheon and the message of the Gospel. In Latin America we need to do further work in incarnating the Gospel in our diverse cultures affirming and celebrating all that is good! This also applies to the diverse religions in our continent.

Those aspects of religions that do not contradict the teaching of the gospel must be affirmed. Those aspects of religion that drives us away from God, the gospel of Jesus Christ must be critiqued and transformed. For example: In Latin America Indian religions can help global Christianity be more sensitive to aspects of God's creation. A more respectful and ecological minded attitude has been demonstrated by Indian peoples through out the years. The integration of the natural and the supernatural, the integration of the sacred and the profane, the integration of the individual in the community resulting in behaviors of solidarity and reciprocity are some of the contributions of Indian religions and conduct to global Christianity[19]

On the other hand there are aspects of Andean Indian religiosity, such as the worship of the mother earth (pachamama), the worship and offering to the mountain spirits, wind and river spirits are aspects of Indian religiosity that drives us away from the creator God of the Bible.

We could say that in Indian religiosity all those beliefs and behaviors that do not take us away from the triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit must be affirmed and reinforced. However all those beliefs and behaviors that drive us away or distract us from the focus of Christianity, Jesus Christ, must be denounced and transformed.

Biblically speaking the model of Paul in Acts 17, his experience among the Greek is a very important missiological model to follow in our dealings with the religions of the world and in Latin America, with the diverse religious expressions of our people.

3. THE INTEGRITY OF MISSION AND THE POOR

It is clear from scripture that God has a special concern for the poor. This concern can clearly be seen in the incarnation. God chose to be born in a humble, poor situation: a manger. This special concern for the poor does not imply exclusion of other groups, as it is also clear that God loves the whole world.

Given the realities of poverty and the poor in our world today particularly in the two thirds world, it is imperative that the integrity of mission actively work for the reduction of poverty and on behalf of the dignity of the poor. Of course this should include the evangelization of the poor.

The global nature of the world in which we live with its economic consequences for the poor, such as lack of employment, unfavorable rules of international trade, the protection of markets etc works for the rich to get richer and for the poor to get poorer. Therefore the Mission with integrity regarding the poor must include acts of benevolence[20] as well as actions that also focus on structural changes.

CEPAL[21] in a ten year study of the socio-economic indicators for Latin America between 1990 and 1999 concludes:

a) The slowness of economic growth and the evolution of the labor market were not favorable for the reduction of poverty[22].

[19] Paredes, Tito: "La Nueva Presencia Evangélica Indígena", Ibid. Pag. 183 – 192.
[20] Theological Forum-vol.XXVIII,No.1, 2 May 2000
[21] CEPAL (The Economic Commission for Latin America), *Una Década de Desarrollo Social en América Latina 1990 – 1999*. Naciones Unidas, Santiago de Chile, Marzo de 2004: 17 - 32.
[22] Ibid

b) Regarding income distribution, in the majority of countries it became worse or very little changed occurred regarding the already established pattern of bad income distribution; 75% of the homes perceive income which is under the average[23].

c) Employment continues to be a challenge. A basic feature of the employment situation has been its increasing informalization and terciarization. The study shows that two thirds of the new urban employments were generated in the informal sector. And the distances between the income of these two sectors show great disparities[24]

d) The many unfavorable labor conditions and laws, unemployment has increased particularly in the South American countries[25].

The challenge we face is not only the reduction of poverty but also the reduction of inequalities. Take Latin America for example, Chile one of the countries that has had economic growth particularly evidenced by the macroeconomic figures, ranks second, after Brazil, in economic inequality. A very small minority of the country gets richer and the great majority, in spite of apparent reduction of poverty, gets poorer[26].

Globalization in its economic dimension refers *"to the political project to create a single global market in which all barriers to trade and capital flows are removed[27]"* "Globalization creates a footloose techno-managerial elite, connected more with their counterparts elsewhere than with their fellow countrymen and more interested in making money than in social well being"[28]

For the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman "there is now a new stratification of the world population into the globalized rich, who overcome space and never have enough time, and the localized poor, who are chained to the spot and can only "kill" time"[29].

We have to recognize that the poor countries of the world have a problem with the predominant economic model in the world today. On the one hand we could condemn it, called for its removal and downfall, this from our perspective may not be of much help. On the other hand we could uncritically accept it closing our ayes to its sinful and demonic dimensions and effects. This is not a christian option either. What then shall we do? See it for what it is: Denounce its sinful, exploitative and demonic aspects that work against the peoples of this world particularly the poor. On the other hand also recognize its positive and beneficial dimensions, no matter how small on behalf of human beings; affirm them and work with them transforming and consecrating them for God's glory.

4. THE INTEGRITY OF MISSION AND CHRISTIAN MISSION

A biblical view of culture and mission is one that sees human beings reflecting Gods likeness and image. Part of this image has to do with the relational nature of God: God the father, God the son and God the Holy Spirit If we accept the christian doctrine of the Trinity, as we do, then we believe that the harmonious relation between the three persons of the one God is a model for the relationship of human beings with God, other human beings and nature. It is a model for christian mission with integrity.

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[23] Ibid
[24] Ibid
[25] Ibid
[26] Ibid
[27] Ramachandra, Vinoth. CMS Annual Sermon 2003: *Global Society: Challenges for Christian Mission*. Page 1
[28] Ibid Page 7
[29] Ibid

As we know, these relationships were broken due to mankind's disobedience and rebellion against God. Human beings and their cultures were affected by sin, God's mission has to do not only with the restoration of these broken relationships, but also with the liberation, spiritual as well as socioeconomic, etc; through Jesus Christ. Thus the integrity of mission includes the salvation and liberation of human beings, their relationships and cultural expression and structures. In the words of Orlando Costas:

> *"Sin is not only personal but also structural. It is structural in the sense that it responds to the logic of collective behavior (Alves). Society is not the sum of its members. It is a complex network of interpersonal cultural and institutional relationships. All of these things constitutes the personality of society."*[30]

God's mission, becomes holistic and integral when we undertake it in the name of Jesus Christ, in the power Holy Spirit, following the example of Jesus Christ our Lord that could be summarized in Mathew 9: 35-37 *"And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity"*[31]

We have the challenge to not only talk but walk the talk, not only to believe and proclaim but also do and live our faith. As christians and as a Church we have been called to demonstrate our faith through works and concrete actions of love and justice especially for the marginalized and the poor communities of our world.

We could paraphrase our vision about the integrity of mission for all peoples: *"Our vision for all peoples of the world, fullness of life in Jesus Christ. Our prayer for each heart, the will to make it possible*[32]*"*

CONCLUSION

Doing mission with integrity and the integrity of mission are like two sides of one coin, they go together. Mission with integrity refers to the way the church carries out her mission. The means to carry out mission have to be according to its message, consistent with the content of the Gospel. It refers to the respect and dignity of all peoples and their cultures. It refers to the taking into account of the context as we live and communicate the Gospel message. It has to do with the conviction that God is actively present in creation and among all the people of the world, involved in the redemption and transformation of his world. This includes culture, religion and the poor.

The integrity of mission refers to the churches faithfulness to the content of the Gospel, to the content of the mission of God through Jesus Christ. It has to do with the Churches faithfulness to the kingdom of God and its values as it makes disciples of all nations, peoples and cultures. It refers not only to the incarnation of the Gospel in cultures but also to the confrontation of the sinful, evil and demonic aspects in culture, religion and the economic structures that maintain poverty in all its aspects in the world.

The message, the means and the context of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ are interrelated and interconnected in a dynamic holism which with the help of the Holy Spirit can accompany the church to be faithful in the way it carries out God's integral mission.

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[30] Costas, Orlando E.: *"Pecado y salvación en América Latina"*, en CLADE II: *América Latina y la evangelización en los años 80,* Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana, México, 1980, p. 275. My translations.
[31] The Holy Bible; Revised Standard Version; Thomas Nelson and Sons, New York. 1946.
[32] This is a modified version of World Vision's vision statement.