

## **The Challenge of Evangelism in Latin and South America**

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When entering a country in which the majority of the people do not speak the language you speak, it is easy to assume that the greatest challenge to communicating the gospel will be overcoming the language barrier that exists between you and those to whom you have come to tell about Jesus. If only this were true. Over the course of the past five or six years, I have learned that this is not the case. The greatest challenge to evangelism in Latin and South America is not the different languages spoken in these regions. Language acquisition is only the first challenge one must overcome.

The greatest challenge to evangelism in Latin and South America, and perhaps in the whole world, is that evangelism, in the vocabulary of the English speaking church, has become something other than what we find in the New Testament.

In the New Testament, we find the proclamation of the Good News – *to euaggelion* – about Jesus Christ. During the expansion of the church in the Acts of the Apostles we find one fact about proclaiming the Good News that I believe has come to be overlooked by many in today's practice of evangelism. When the Good News was proclaimed to Jewish audiences, the proclamation almost always begins with God's covenant with Abraham. When the Good News was proclaimed to Gentile audiences, the proclamation began with God creating all that is. The fact is this – those proclaiming the Good News in the New Testament knew their audience's beliefs and tailored the message so that their hearers could understand to which God they were referring, what He was doing in history, who Jesus was and what He came to do in relation to God's purposes. The proclamation of the Good News started where the people were and built a foundation for them to truly understand why Jesus' life, death and bodily resurrection were the Good News.

Somewhere in the course of church history, and I believe in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, evangelism became a packaged sales deal. The first "canned approach" to evangelism that I learned was Evangelism Explosion. It was very well organized and very thorough. In its day, in the United States, I believe it was pretty good. Most people in the United States at that time had some foundational understanding of Scripture. Evangelism Explosion built on that foundation so that people could understand why Jesus' life, death and resurrection were Good News.

In the United States, Bible classes were removed from public schools. People quit sending their children to Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. The basic foundational understanding of Scripture that Evangelism Explosion built upon diminished (and has virtually disappeared). Sadly, evangelism training has changed with the times. One would think that as the foundational understanding of Scripture decreased, evangelism training would change to include more foundational teachings of Scripture so that people could truly understand why Jesus' life, death and resurrection were (and still are) the Good News. From what I have seen, the opposite is true. More recent evangelism training material has been simplified, reducing the amount of Scripture that is used to explain the Good News about Jesus to people who have almost no foundational knowledge of Scripture (if they have any at all). Thus, evangelism today has been reduced to little more than a "2 minute" personal

testimony and five, or even ten, verses of Scripture, which are often presented outside of their Scriptural context.

Some may argue that the current evangelism methods used in U.S. churches are still effective there. I do not intend to argue that issue. My point is that while evangelism methods developed in the U.S. may be effective there, it is not necessarily true that they will be effective outside the U.S. When leaving the U.S. to evangelize in other countries and cultures, it is vital to understand the audience to whom the Good News will be proclaimed and what they believe. Only then can one proclaim the gospel in such a way that one's hearers can understand why the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are the Good News.

This brings us back to Latin and South America. There's something about Mary and the saints in this region of the world that must be understood by any and all who plan to evangelize here. Within the Catholic faith as it is practiced in Latin and South America, especially in Brazil, Mary and the saints hold incredible sway over people. They are believed to be intercessors between the person and God. Many even hold Mary above Jesus (in practice) and almost equal to God the Father Himself. So, the question one must ask is this – Can a person become a follower of Jesus and at the same time remain a follower of Mary and the saints?

The Bible is clear that there is but one mediator between God and man – Jesus Christ (I Tim. 2:5). This is at least one part of why the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are Good News. And, it is a relevant aspect of the gospel which must be explained to people who follow Mary and the saints. Those who believe that any other person can be the mediator, or one of the mediators, between God and man clearly do not understand the Good News about Jesus Christ. Therefore, any proclamation of the Good News in Latin and South America must include the fact that it is Christ alone who is the one mediator between God and man. You cannot be a follower of Mary and the saints and of Jesus Christ at the same time. The two are mutually exclusive. This fact is too often missing in evangelistic efforts in Latin and South America.

When people come to Latin and South America with evangelism in mind, they usually do not realize the role that prayer plays in these cultures. Every saint of the Catholic church has at least one prescribed prayer that adherents memorize and pray often. Mary has more prescribed prayers than I can count. For many, these prayers are prayed often, more often than daily. Some Catholics pray these prayers so often that they make the five prayers a day of Muslims look sparse. However, the prayers to the saints are prayed with an almost animistic approach. The underlying belief system is that the saints or Mary will act for the benefit of the person praying. In Latin and South America, prayers are used to get what one wants or to attain a benefit for the one praying or for someone they know. Many folks in this part of the world will pray just about any prayer that they believe will gain them a benefit.

That being the case, the “Sinner’s Prayer,” used in modern evangelism, is often viewed as a “get out of hell free” card. Just because a person in this part of the world prays a prayer does not mean that they have faith in Jesus, or even that they understand the Good News about Jesus. Generally speaking, if you ask someone here if they want to pray a specific prayer so they can go to heaven and not hell, they will want to pray that prayer. The problem is that they, more often than not, place their faith in the prayer rather than in Jesus. This proves to be

very problematic, especially when the evangelizer proclaims that the one who prayed the Sinner's Prayer is saved. The one who prayed that prayer walks away thinking they are saved because they prayed a prayer and the person who told them the words proclaimed them to be saved. It may be that the person, placing their faith in the prayer or in the foreigner, merely received a gospel inoculation.

In Roman Catholicism, people go and confess their sins to the priest and he proclaims them forgiven. Their "salvation" is proclaimed to be by the priest. So, when a "missionary," one believed to have spiritual authority, proclaims the person saved simply because he or she prayed a certain prayer, the person believes they are saved because it was proclaimed to be so by the one esteemed to have spiritual authority.

My friend and colleague, Daniel, had a very sad experience about seven years ago. This experience went a long way toward solidifying in our minds the things I have written above. This is no mere illustration; it is a sad story of an event that did take place.

Some years ago, Daniel met a young man in South Brazil. When the young man learned that Daniel was a missionary, he unleashed a load of anger on Daniel for several minutes. During this time the young man told Daniel how "you evangelicals" had lied to him just like the Catholic Church because "You all said that if I prayed the prayer of the evangelicals my life would change, but I prayed that prayer and nothing changed! You are liars!" Most everyone reading this would agree that salvation is more than merely praying a prayer and that this young man did not understand what he was doing. Most everyone reading this would also agree that the present state of this young man is worse than before because he was unwilling to listen to anything that Daniel could say in response. Daniel was completely discredited in this young man's mind because "you evangelicals" had lied to him about the "sinner's prayer."

In practical terms, most approaches to evangelism today have the Sinner's Prayer as their goal. What many people who get trained in these methods of evangelism do not realize is that there is no example of someone being led to pray a "sinner's prayer" in the Bible. Repentance is necessary, but no one was ever told what words to use to repent. When one is truly convicted of one's sins, they will repent. David described this as having a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17). Paul described it as having godly sorrow which leads to repentance (2 Corinthians 7:10). Luke described it as being pierced to the heart because of one's sins (Acts 2:37). If our proclamation of the gospel does not result in the lost person reaching this state of awareness of his or her sins, no prayer will save him or her. The "sinner's prayer" is not what saves a person. Faith and repentance of sin after the conviction of the Holy Spirit through hearing an understandable presentation of the gospel is what saves a person. This should be the goal of our gospel proclamation.

The "evangel" of evangelism simply means "good news". When we evangelize we are about the task of good-newsing those who have not heard the good news about Jesus. So, just what is the good news about Jesus? Is the good news about Jesus the same for all people in all places? Yes and no. What Jesus accomplished and provided for us through His life, death and resurrection is good news for all people in all places. However, the way we present the Good News about Jesus to different people in different places will not be the same. As mentioned earlier, the New Testament records that the Gospel was present to the Jews in one way and to

the Gentiles in another way. Why? They were different peoples with different backgrounds and religions. The earliest followers of Jesus knew that they had to proclaim the Good News about Jesus differently to different peoples if they were to understand why the life, death and resurrection of Jesus were Good News to those peoples.

Today, we, too, must proclaim the Good News about Jesus in different ways to different peoples. The goal of evangelism is still the same as it was in the New Testament. We want all people to understand why the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is Good News. Our error lies in the fact that we try to explain to others why the life, death and resurrection is good news to us, rather than getting to know them well enough that we can explain why the life, death and resurrection is good news for them. We should be about the task of presenting the good news about Jesus in a way that others can understand it. This is a very complicated task when one leaves one's own language and culture. However, language is not the greatest difficulty to overcome.

Other cultures and religions have beliefs and practices that are barriers to our proclaiming the good news in a way that people within those religions and cultures can truly understand. There is only one way to discover those barriers. We must spend time with people within those religions and cultures and develop relationships through which we can understand how to present the good news in a way that they will understand.

In the New Testament, the good news was proclaimed based on the ideas that the hearers had about God or gods. Foundational facts about the One, True God were then presented. God's interaction with mankind and Israel were presented as foundational truths necessary for the hearers to understand who God was and what He was doing throughout history. Only after these foundations were laid, do we see an explanation of why the life, death and resurrection of Jesus were good news for those hearing the evangel proclaimed.

After coming to understand one's audience, one can better understand whether a one-time encounter presentation of the gospel is likely to make disciples in one's own context. In Latin and South America such an approach to evangelism is not likely to actually make disciples.

The challenge we face in making disciples in Latin and South America is actually building the relationships that are necessary in order to lay a foundational understanding of Scripture that is sufficient for people to understand why the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are Good News. Anything less is not evangelism as we find in the New Testament.