

Christian Witness in the Universities

C. René Padilla

Theological perspective

Missionaries are often tempted to think that the work in which they are engaged is *the* answer to all the evils which hamper the growth of the Church of Christ. We are liable to imagine that the particular ministry we have been called to exercise encases the key which will unlock the treasures of new life to the enrichment of those whose spiritual welfare has been committed to us. And our excitement for 'the work' reaches proportions without measure when some well-known 'missionary strategist' happens to make a pronouncement which confirms that which we have always suspected—that our field of activities is the most strategic one with regard to the spread of the Gospel in the world. If only every Christian could see what we have seen . . . !

Of the danger of such an attitude, I am well aware. It is nearly impossible for me to forget that a recognized authority in world missions has said that 'the most urgent missionary task in the world today is to win university students in Latin America to Jesus Christ'.¹ And how can I disregard the forcefulness with which others have argued for the limitless strategic possibilities of student work in relation to world evangelization?²

With this sort of encouragement, it would surely be easy to place pragmatic considerations above the central motives of a missionary work patterned after the teaching of the Scriptures.³ I believe, however, that important as such considerations are, they remain secondary to a fact which belongs to the very essence of the Gospel—that God's action in Jesus Christ embraces *all men* in a purpose of grace. Paul's denial of a distinction between Jew and Gentile with regard to the possibility of redemption,⁴ which lay at the basis of his Gentile mission, may quite legitimately be extended to the denial of the same kind of distinction between the educated and the uneducated. Christ died for *all* and 'the same Lord is Lord of *all* and bestows His riches upon *all* who call upon Him' (Rom. 10.12). Whatever we think of the strategic importance of reaching students with the Gospel,⁵ we leave the field of the New Testament unless both our theology and practice of missions allow no withholding of the message from them.

Regrettable neglect

That such a withholding has persistently been allowed in the mission fields of the world hardly needs be argued. The failure of the Church in the evangelization of the educated is apparent to the most inexperienced observer. This is certainly so at least in the case of Latin America. Here, where the Protestant movement is said to be increasing at a rate which

About the Author. C. René Padilla was born in South America, has studied in the U.S.A. and England, and is presently with the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students in Peru.

surpasses the rate of over-all population growth,⁶ the presence of the educated in the churches is proportionally so negligible as to be virtually non-existent.⁷ The impression one would gain is that the Gospel has no appeal for the higher classes.

As an explanation of this phenomenon, the distinguished anthropologist Eugene A. Nida has suggested that there is a connection between the readiness with which the message is being accepted among the lower classes and the fact that these classes have much to gain and very little to lose by becoming Protestant.⁸ There is, however, an even simpler explanation: *the history of the modern missionary movement is marked by an almost complete neglect of students and professionals. With a few notable exceptions, the large majority of missionaries have orientated their work primarily to savages in the jungles and secondarily to peasants in the rural areas and the underprivileged in the cities, to the total abandonment of a whole segment of the population—the educated.* A few possible factors for this regrettable neglect may be suggested:

1. *A 'romantic' view of missions:* There has been a tendency in the 'older' churches to see in their missionaries the epitome of dedication and sacrifice, a sort of 'heroes' willing to leave the 'Homeland' in order to take the Gospel to the uncivilized. Missionaries have often been expected to make dramatic presentations of their work in order to maintain among their supporters a 'romantic' image of their vocation. And it is an undeniable fact that the witness among students lacks those elements which make the work among a primitive tribe an ideal subject-matter for the most moving reports—the uncomfortableness, danger, and adventure of life in the jungles; the first contact with people hitherto unknown to white man; the excitement of a language reduced to writing and of the production of Scripture in another tongue . . .⁹

2. *The educational level of most missionaries.* In a large measure, the modern missionary movement may be traced back to the eighteenth-century evangelical awakening which spread from England to the English colonies in North America.¹⁰ The flame kindled through the preaching of Whitefield and Wesley was kept burning and eventually resulted in a Bible-school movement which became a veritable storehouse of missionary manpower. Whatever our own opinion concerning it, this movement must be recognized today as the greatest and most influential missionary force of the Church in the modern period.¹¹ Its contribution to the evangelization of the world is not for us to measure. Finding expression in non-denominational societies, it has flooded the ends of the earth with missionaries who appeal to the Bible as their only source of authority and emphasize man's need of regeneration.

It would be true to say, however, that the virtual absence of the educated from the 'younger' churches reflects a common weakness of the modern missionary movement: the neglect of students and professionals answers to the low educational level of the large majority of missionaries in the 'non-historic' groups. Constituted mainly of Bible-school graduates, these groups have usually adopted an attitude of indifference to people in the

upper strata of society. Their anti-intellectualism and the lack of concern for an honest facing of the questions which are being raised among those who think has made it impossible for them to gain a hearing.

3. *Inability to communicate the message.* No task involved in missionary work is more exacting than the communication of the Gospel across cultural barriers. It demands not only a knowledge of the message itself, but also a thorough familiarity with the thought pattern and values of an audience which, in a larger or a smaller measure, remains removed from the herald. The task is doubly difficult when the missionary himself fails to distinguish between Christianity and the cultural accretions of his own background. If it is true that, as has been claimed,¹² the isolation of evangelicals in North America has resulted in an inability to communicate with those outside their circle, it is not difficult to understand the proportions of the problem with which missionaries with this sort of background are faced in trying to proclaim the Gospel abroad. Naturally, these 'monastic' tendencies hamper communication at all levels; but the situation becomes critical beyond measure with regard to communication to people who are particularly sensitive to the importation of foreign patterns of thought and conduct and to any disregard of their own cultural heritage. It is no wonder that such a high percentage of missionaries, who have never really entered into the life stream of the nation, have comfortably settled to a ministry to simpler folk among whom they are more apt to reproduce the congregations they have left behind in the 'Homeland'¹³!

Two tragic consequences

The consequences that this neglect to which we have been pointing has had for the Church can hardly be exaggerated. It is my own conviction that some of the most serious problems which the Protestant movement, and more particularly the 'fundamentalist' wing of it¹⁴, faces today are a direct derivation of both the emphases and failures of missionary work from its beginnings in the nineteenth century. Two of these problems may here be mentioned:

1. *Lack of well-trained national leaders.* It would hardly be in accordance with the Spirit of Christ—He who chose a few peasants from Galilee to be His apostles—to deplore the presence of hundreds of those who today have taken upon their shoulders much of the responsibility for the building up of the Church of Christ in Latin America, despite all the limitations which their lack of education places upon them. Yet, we do deplore the almost complete absence of a national leadership equipped *both* spiritually *and* intellectually to meet the challenge of the day. Three areas where this absence is felt may here be suggested:

(a) The ministry of the Word. It can hardly be over-emphasized that the large majority of churches throughout Latin America have no concept of the meaning of Bible exposition. There is a proliferation of Bible schools, most of which function at a level below that of secondary school; seminaries are few and far between.¹⁵ The net results are:

(1) a common disparagement of the ministry on the part of the educated (is a Christian university student to be regarded as 'unspiritual' if he feels that for him it would be a waste of time to study in a Bible school where a high percentage of students hardly know how to read?); (2) an evangelical community living on a starvation diet—the preaching of the rudiments of the Gospel with variations in texts but scarcely in content.

(b) The relation between Christianity and culture. There has been no serious effort to relate the Gospel to the social context. On the whole, the Protestant movement in these lands is devoid of theologians and thinkers able to show the relevance of the message to Latin American culture.¹⁶ Its ethic is patterned more on imported moulds than on Biblical principles. It may at times be described as a small minority of anti-intellectual isolationists with a faith characterized by a maximum of emotionalism and a minimum of reality.

(c) Church organization and policy. With a few exceptions, missionaries remain in the positions of leadership within the church and responsible for the policies which govern its life and outreach. All too many missionary societies have failed to produce evidence that the concept of an indigenous church is to them more than an ideal to which one may readily pay lip-service. In a large majority of cases such institutions as Bible institutes, radio stations, hospitals, printing shops, etc., connected with the work of the Church, are completely dependent upon missionaries for orientation and management.

2. The foreign character of the Protestant movement. The thesis common in Roman Catholic circles in Latin America, that Protestantism is essentially a foreign movement, remains on the whole unchallenged. The lack of a practical application of the Gospel to the local situation, the importation of ways and modes from outside, the predominance of missionaries in the positions of leadership—these are only some of the factors which seem to lend support to it. True as it is that Protestantism is now a demographic quantum which cannot simply be disregarded by the 'established' Church, it is nonetheless undeniable that it has been so far unable to extend its roots into the soil of Latin American thought and life. In a great measure, Richard Patter's dictum written over two decades ago, for all the numerical growth of the Protestant movement, remains true: 'Latin America is what it is because Catholicism is what it is'.¹⁷ By contrast, we South American Protestants on the whole continue to be appallingly unaware that the Christ brought to us by the conquerors is by no means the only one known within the Spanish tradition,¹⁸ and looking outside our own borders for those who will do all serious thinking for us.

New prospects

The foregoing discussion has been necessary in order for us to understand the great importance of the Christian witness in the universities in relation to the life of the Church in the fields of the world and particularly in Latin America. It cannot be sufficiently emphasized that the description here given is intended as a *general* picture of the situation and therefore

it leaves room for all necessary exceptions. As such, however, it provides a background against which we are better able to discern the significance of student work today. We thus come to the admission that, even though we began our thinking on the missionary responsibility of the Church with regard to students from a theological perspective, we cannot escape the tragic consequences of our neglect of them. We may not evangelize students *because* they are a strategic class, but the neglect of our spiritual task will always render a harvest of deplorable results, such as those described above.

The opposite, however, is also true. The handful of missionaries, both national and foreign, who constrained by the love of Christ are now engaged in the witness among students cannot avoid the conclusion that here is a source of vitality with unlimited possibilities not only for the Church but also for society at large. What God is already doing cannot be measured in terms of statistics. Nor can a report of the latest developments in this area of His work be attempted within the limits of the present article. Here it will suffice to point to some of the features of the type of ministry in which the writer has been given a share, features whose bearing on the situation described above will be obvious to the reader:

1. *Presentation of the whole Gospel.* Paul's concern was that those who came to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ would come to an experiential knowledge of the whole counsel of God. By contrast, all too often we have been satisfied with an evangelism which hardly goes beyond the level of emotions; our zeal for conversions has led us to a reduction of the Gospel to a naive philosophy of success. We have failed to show the cost of discipleship and the lordship of Christ in all aspects of human existence. In our witness to Christ among university students we must, therefore, emphasize not only conversion and regeneration as an *initial* stage of the Christian life, but also growth into the likeness of Christ. We cannot separate the *kerygma* from the *didache* and salvation from discipleship. Furthermore, conversion means far more than 'believism'—the ready assent to a doctrinal formula—and manhood in Christ transcends the mastery of pious techniques. It is imperative that we lead the seeker to a commitment of the totality of his person to Christ as Lord and that, beyond the point of decision, we help him to discern the implications of Christ's lordship in relation to each aspect of life in his own historical context. Whatever else, Christian maturity certainly involves freedom before God and the exhilarating discovery in our own personal experience that, as revealed in the Bible, the God of redemption is also the God of creation and that there is no divorce between faith and reason.

2. *Student initiative.* Not only do we deprive ourselves of an incomparable joy: we also fail to develop the sense of responsibility—essential to true leadership—among Christian students, when we withhold from them the task of initiative in witness among their peers. That there is a place for instruction and practical help, no-one would deny. Christian students need to be shown not only the *what* and the *why*, but also the *how* of university evangelism. But we are far from fulfilling our commission

unless we fully recognize that there is no better evangelist among students than those who are students themselves, and that making mistakes is a part of the learning process in the forging of leaders. The continuous intervention of 'full-time' student evangelists may produce immediate statistical results, but in the long run it will be inimical to the development of responsible leaders. 'There must be nothing willy-nilly about evangelism. It is not the job of only a few professionals, but the joyful privilege of millions of articulate, self-giving Christians'.¹⁹ And the Holy Spirit is able to see to it that through the unexperienced, at times fearful student, Christ is presented, by life and by word, to those forming part of the university community. No-one has a monopoly on the Spirit, and we certainly fail to trust Him when we fail to trust the Christian student and to curtail his own initiative.

3. *Autonomy.* There is no place for missionary paternalism in the witness among students. Our call is not to reproduce ourselves with all the thought patterns and ways of doing things which we bring from our own background, but to make disciples of Jesus Christ—followers of our Lord, not of a system or an ideology. In practical terms this means that we must leave Christian students free to choose their own approach and methods in student work. This is not to deny the existence of Biblical principles which remain constant across national boundaries; but our aim must be a student witness in which Biblical principles are applied to the local situation, without being forced into ready-made jackets imported from abroad. 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom', and only a ministry characterized by the freedom of the Spirit will result in the formation of national leaders able to think by themselves and to discern the meaning of discipleship in their own world.

There is no limit to what God can do through students who have caught the vision of Himself and of His purpose for humanity as revealed in Jesus Christ. The Church stands in need of a renewed sense of her vocation; the world awaits the message of deliverance from the powers of darkness. In a quiet way God is moving into this situation through students who by His grace are walking with Christ in the way of discipleship.

- 1 The reference here is to Dr. Clyde Taylor, Executive Secretary of the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association.
- 2 Cf. Eric S. Fife and Arthur F. Glasser, *Missions in Crisis* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962), chapter 10: 'Reaching the Strategic Students'.
- 3 For an examination of Scriptural missionary motives as exemplified in Paul's life see Donald G. Miller, 'Pauline Motives for the Christian Mission', *The Theology of the Christian Mission*, ed. G. H. Anderson (London: SCM, 1961), pp. 72ff.
- 4 Cf. e.g., Rom. 3: 27ff; 10: 12; Gal. 3: 6ff.
- 5 A good case for reaching students as an aspect of missionary strategy is made by Eric S. Fife and Arthur F. Glasser, *op. cit.* We must deplore, however, the attitude of Christians engaged in student evangelism, who conceive of the preaching of the Gospel as a means to detain the spread of Communism. Our views on Communism aside, the idea that 'Communists are taking over the universities—we must proclaim the Gospel to the students' reflects a regrettable mixture of Christianity with political and economic interests. Taking Scripture as the starting point, we must proclaim the Gospel to the students whether Communists are taking over the universities or not.

- 6 The Protestant constituency in Latin America has been estimated at approximately 10 million, out of a total population of 200 million.
- 7 This is more applicable in some countries (e.g. Colombia, Ecuador, Peru) than in others (e.g. Brazil, Argentina), and to 'non-historic' than to 'historic' churches. Even in the case of the former the situation is changing slowly; but still the number of educated people in the membership of Protestant churches in Latin America as a whole is proportionally insignificant.
- 8 Eugene A. Nida, 'The Relationship of Social Structure to the Problem of Evangelism in Latin America', *Practical Anthropology*, Vol. V, No. 3 (May-June, 1958), pp. 101ff.
- 9 No disparagement of tribal work is here intended, but simply the recognition that this type of ministry lends itself more readily to sensationalism in the interests of promotion. It must be admitted, however, that student work may also be surrounded by the glamour of impressive statistics and the overtones of a cosmic struggle against Communism.
- 10 Cf. Thomas J. Liggett, *The Role of the Missionary in Latin America Today* (New York: The Committee on Co-operation in Latin America, 1963), pp. 8ff.
- 11 That the Bible-school, 'non-historic' groups have continued to develop while the 'historic' churches (with the exception of the Southern Baptists) have remained stationary with regard to missions is a matter of common knowledge. In Latin America alone it is estimated that 80% of the total missionary force proceeds from 'non-historic' churches.
- 12 Fife and Glasser, *op. cit.*, pp. 204f.
- 13 It would be a mistake to believe that *all* missionaries fit into this pattern: there are honourable exceptions. The above paragraph, therefore, must be taken for what it is intended to be—a *general* description of the situation.
- 14 Neither liberalism nor neo-orthodoxy has ever amounted to much in the Protestant community in Latin America. It is a rebuke to Evangelicals that, now that new currents of theological thought are gaining momentum here we are beginning to see the emergence of a well-trained Latin American leadership under the aegis of non-Evangelicals.
- 15 It would not be at all unfair to say that many a Bible school bearing the name of 'seminary' simply does not deserve it.
- 16 Working on the compilation of a bibliography for Christian students I was recently struck again by the unbelievable drought of evangelical literature in Spanish. It must be furthermore noted that a high percentage of the existing works are translations from English.
- 17 Richard Patter, *Catholicism in Latin America* (Washington National Welfare Conference, 1945), p. 9.
- 18 This has been eloquently shown by John D. Mackay in *The Other Spanish Christ* (The Macmillan Company, 1933).
- 19 Werner G. Marx, *Latin American Evangelist*, (May-June, 1966), p. 13.