



+ FEATURE

ESCHATOLOGY & MISSION

A Latin American Perspective

BY **PABLO A. DEIROS, PHD**

deiros38@gmail.com

Pablo Deiros is the Vice-President of the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

As we move deeper into the new millennium we need a new hermeneutical key to understand our present history, the mission of the church, and what the people of God in the world are experiencing today, particularly in Latin America. We have to reflect on our theology and propose our missiology from a perspective (or context) which is situated in the future, not in the present.

The Globalization Phenomenon

The most important consequence of such change in perspective, in my opinion, is not so much the change in the axis of our perspective, but the phenomenon of *globalization*. I am particularly referring to the globalization of the Christian faith with all its implications. This phenomenon in itself has its own identifiable roots in history. There is a definite break with the denominational barriers, not so much in terms of ecclesiastical structures, but as a change in our understanding of what so many Christians around the world are experiencing. Christians everywhere are beginning to see the fulfillment of the Christian mission as a spin-off from their particular reality, onto the whole world and in all directions. We are more and more becoming citizens of the world and we are engaging ourselves with human needs wherever they may be found.

This has a lot to do with our understanding of history (i.e., our past). I am feeling increasingly uncomfortable with the traditional understanding we have had of Christian history from the time of Augustine of Hippo, onwards. The idea of history as a linear movement which progresses infinitely toward its *telos*, with its final fulfillment in Christ Jesus, may be adequate in our understanding of the future of humanity from a Christian perspective, but it has its limitations. I believe that it has been exactly this traditional philosophy of the Christian history which was taken over by the

What we need are less linear models in favor of more organic models



Enlightenment and penetrated the Protestantism of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries—and has determined our philosophy of history ever since.

This Augustinian understanding has controlled our thinking by forcing us to see all historical events from a bi-dimensional perspective (constrained by time and space). I am beginning to ask myself whether this bi-dimensional model is indeed the most appropriate in our understanding of the way in which God intervenes in history today. Perhaps we need to incorporate a tri-dimensional model to our understanding of the history of Christian witness. In this new historical model, each event is linked to the other, not so much as one of several links in succession, but rather as several knots which are linked by the threads of a net (or network), or perhaps as the vertices of a polyhedron which are interconnected by their intersecting lines.

What we need are less linear (bi-dimensional) models in favor of more organic (tri-dimensional) models to reflect about our theology and our missiology. A new tri-dimensional model may well help us do a better job at creating more effective missiological strategies to complete the mission that we have been entrusted with by the Lord.

A tri-dimensional understanding of the reality of mission better suits our globalizing understanding of reality. The bi-dimensional or linear understanding which differentiates between *sending* countries and *receiving* countries has been replaced by a more dynamic polyhedral network of multiple relationships in which all send and all receive at the same time, under the lordship of Christ. This is the perception I get about the world today as far as Christian witness is concerned. This sending-and-receiving mutuality increases at a breathtaking speed when we understand it through a tri-dimensional perspective.

The Question of Unity

In view of the eschatological weight of this future, what are some of its theological and missiological consequences? The first consequence is that, in Christian terms, if the Lord is coming to take his Bride, we have to do something about this Bride of his. Her state is deplorable. She is dismembered, divided, prostituted, filled with sin, confused,

the Body of Christ is not... a single living cell

sterile, passive, and defeated to say the least. It is indeed a horrible picture. Above all, we must recognize that, if the Lord is coming soon, instead of a beautiful Bride, what we have to present to him is a shameful harem of selfish concubines, each one pretending to be the sole owner of the Bridegroom, of his truth, and of the exclusive expressions of his kingdom.

This leads us to think especially about the question of Christian unity. It is a fundamental component of the context in which we do our theological and missiological reflection from the perspective of the future. I believe that all our efforts to stimulate and promote the unity of the people of God have failed. This has happened because we have not understood the meaning of the Church as the Body of Christ, and especially, as the Bride of Christ. Our theological conclusions have been wrong, or at least, they have along the centuries proved to be ineffective to express the reality of the unity for which Jesus pleaded so earnestly with the Father (John 17).

In most of our ecumenical efforts—especially in the second half of the 20th century—we have focused on achieving the unity of an *institutional* church. Every effort has been done with the aim of arriving at agreements (mainly political and formal) on issues of faith and order, life and work, liturgy and spirituality, and so on. We have tried to establish missionary strategies to avoid institutional competition, and we have signed mission declarations or agreements to improve our own statistics. But immediately following our *unity*, we discuss how best to *divide* the fruit or we fight for prestige and power, if indeed there has been any fruit.

The truth is that we have invested more time and effort in *negotiating* our unity than in

working together to the glory of Christ and the expansion of his kingdom. We have assumed that we have to agree on the Eucharist, baptism, and ministry, among other things, in order to prepare ourselves to work together as the Body of Christ. But this has nothing to do with the reality of the fact that we are *the* Body of Christ.

First of all, the Body of Christ is not an amoeba. It is not a single living cell. It has an amazing diversity. God willed it that way; therefore, there is no room for dispute or envy among the members of the body. Diversity is an essential ingredient in the richness and unity of the Body. The human body, in comparison, is one because all members are connected in the same body, not because this member is the same as that. This is what Paul talks about in I Corinthians 12:12-27.

If it is true that Christ is coming, we need an urgent ecclesiological agenda. We have to work hard to dilute the barriers that still separate us. It is precisely because of this increasing awareness which Christians are experiencing worldwide about Christ's immediate return that the ideology of denominationalism—which has characterized our way of being Christians—is beginning to undergo a crisis of disintegration. I am not suggesting that we get rid of the traditional denominations. I do believe, however, that we are realizing that more than a *hand*, we are *one of the hands* of the Body of Christ, and that others are his *eyes, ears* or *feet* of the same Body.

We are beginning to realize that the Body is more than the individual, the collective reality is more than the individual reality, the organic nature of the church is more than its institutional nature. Because of this, I believe that if we are going to talk about the tendencies that define our context—looking at it from the future to the present—one of the main tendencies is the unity of the Body of Christ.

Theological and Missiological Homogenization

Another tendency in our context—again looking from the future into the present—is



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the theological homogenization that is currently under way. If the Holy Spirit that lives in you is the same Holy Spirit that lives in me, it is a plain contradiction that you would understand God in a certain way whereas I would understand Him in another way. If the Holy Spirit's task is to lead us into all truth, and to reveal to us what the Father wants us to know and the things to come (John 16:13), how is it possible that our conclusions are disparate most of the time? It is understandable that your *weltanschauung* and your conceptualization of reality would provide particular nuances to your understanding of God, and that such nuances be different from the ones I hold. But surely—in theological terms—your essential understanding of God has to be close enough to mine due to the simple fact that we are both objects of the same pedagogical work of one and the same Spirit of God.

We know the scriptural truth that “we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (I Corinthians 12:13). In these last days, as we grow in our understanding of the work of the Spirit, we feel that we are all going in the same direction. Beyond our local colors and nuances, and beyond the way we each express our understanding of the truth of God, I have the impression that the people of God all over the world are increasingly experiencing a spiritual consensus. I see, therefore, a growing

homogenization among Christians as part-and-parcel of this perception of the present from the perspective of the future.

The tendency today is to minimize all that divides us because what drives us today is the mission and the imperative of accomplishing the task we have received—because the Lord is coming. He wants to find us, his servants, busy doing his mission, not discussing dogmatic minutiae. The imperative of the present hour is missiological, and the need to win this world for Christ has more value than all theological negotiation or utopian dreaming. The urgency rests in the fact that if indeed Christ is coming, we do not want him to find us idle or empty-handed. We know that he wills the salvation of the whole world (II Peter 3:9). However, if he is to find *faith* on earth and not *unbelief* (Luke 18:8), his people must proclaim the gospel of the kingdom with power and authority. 

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