

Message to the Church in Ibero America

A COMIBAM Congress Plenary

To look back over two decades of sowing and reaping in the Muslim world in an attempt to extract some lessons for the future of cross-cultural missions from Ibero America is not easy for me. I have always been more inclined to concentrate on the challenges of the present and future, rather than remembering the successes and failures of the past. However, since our Father is so committed to extending to all peoples the awesome blessings He promised to His friend Abraham (of justification by faith and reception of His Holy Spirit¹), we must apply our best powers of reflection to try and give our beloved Redeemer all the satisfaction He deserves.² I trust that this is the objective of this COMIBAM conference.

Living and witnessing for twenty years in an Islamic society will certainly impact one's perspective regarding many things. When my wife and I have returned to visit churches in South America, we have commented on various contrasts between the two contexts. We have also felt a growing unease about several tendencies of modern-day Latin American evangelicalism, which I consider serious hindrances to the task of bringing "the gospel of the grace of God"³ to Muslim as well as other peoples. With all humility and respect, I would like to share five of these concerns in this "Message to the Church in Ibero

America." I trust that the Holy Spirit will confirm what He considers important and discard the rest.

1. "Christo-humanism"

The first concern that comes to mind is what I have called, in a deliberate contradiction of terms, "christo-humanism."⁴ I am referring to the generalized tendency of many believers to transfer the predominant worldview of our modern Western societies to their religious experience. That is, to maintain themselves at the center of their new "Christian" universe: "The most important thing is *my* happiness, well-being and fulfillment. God exists to grant *me* all the desires of *my* heart."⁵ Through *my* 'faith', *my* prayers, fasting, offerings, and church attendance I can get Him to grant *me* whatever I want." (Even in missionary work we easily fall into having "*our*" contacts, "*our*" projects or "*our*" converts(!) as the main focus of attention and "worship".)

The contradiction, of course, is that the Christian universe already has a Center, and that Center is not you or me (nor your church or my denomination), but rather the "Sun of righteousness,"⁶ He who died and rose to be *Lord*,⁷ the One to whom all nations

belong⁸ and who deserves to receive them as an offering,⁹ by whom and for whom *all* things were created, and who must in *all* things have the preeminence.¹⁰

Coming from a context where Christians are persecuted, I find the glitzy gospel presented in many of our churches and TV programs quite disconcerting. Everything seems focused on making *me* feel fulfilled, satisfied, appreciated... designed to tell *me* what I like to hear, with no fear of giving offence... rarely any coherent dealing with wrath, sin, judgment, condemnation, suffering or martyrdom. I have often wondered: if following Jesus were as costly in Latin America as it is in the Muslim world, how many members would our congregations have? In North Africa we do not ask, "Who wants to *accept* salvation?"—and we should not ask that elsewhere either. The question is, "Who wants to *give themselves*, body and soul, to this Lord and Savior?"

If we are unable to restore a radical Christ-centeredness in our churches and mission endeavors, it would be better (and more honest!) for us to simply join the New Era and openly worship ourselves... we would have lost all spiritual relevance and any possibility of becoming true bearers of "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ"¹¹ for those blinded by the lies and idolatries of the "god of this age."

Lord, send into Your harvest laborers with a grand vision of Christ and a burning passion for Him and for His glory among all the nations!

Antonio Peralta

1 Gal.3:8,14.

2 Is.53:11. I find it interesting that we, the modern heirs of the "father of the faith," find ourselves at the same distance as he (two thousand years) from the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of the "Heir of all things" (Heb.1.2)... Could it be that the time has come for the completion of this great missionary project God first announced to Abraham?

3 Acts 20:24.

4 There are many "echoes" here of the syncretism, commonly referred to as "Christo-paganism," that resulted from the shallow evangelization conducted in past centuries by Roman Catholic missionaries among many of the indigenous peoples of Latin America.

5 Ps.37:4.

6 Mal.4:2.

7 Rom.14:9.

8 Ps.2:8.

9 Rom.15:16.

10 Col.1:16,18.

11 2Co.4:4-5.

2. Theology of results

A second concern is the “theology-of-results” mentality that seems to have become popular in this time of abundant reaping in Latin America. “If things come easy, with no major complications and quickly produce the abundant ‘fruit’ we expected, we can know it was the will of God; otherwise, it wasn’t.” “God’s will is that we concentrate all our efforts on those peoples where we can get the biggest ‘harvest’ with the least investment of time, energy and money.” Though criteria like these may be useful for profit-seeking businesses, they have never helped in discerning the will of God. It is sobering to reexamine the context of the classic “missionary call” passage of Isaiah 6: God calls, Isaiah responds and the results are... incomprehension, rejection and destruction... and the promise of an eventual small rebirth.

We need to urgently recover a “theology of obedience” in which *any* effort, *any* sacrifice is more than worthwhile if requested by the One to whom we belong.¹² I remember the words of a North African brother commenting on the habit of praying for more freedom to propagate the Gospel: “We don’t need more freedom; all we really need is more obedience!” Obedience to God’s commands when they make no apparent sense and when they go against our natural inclination is the only way we can show evidence of the two things He most values: our *faith* and our *love*.¹³

Besides, the obedience of faith *before* seeing tangible results seems to be the spiritual foundation on which our Lord is pleased to build all His grand projects among humans. The “father of the faith,” Abraham, as well as the “author and finisher of the faith,” Jesus Christ, comes to mind. **Abraham** was given divine promises that he would possess the land of Canaan and have descendants as numerous as the sand of the sea, but he died having received only one son of that promise and a burial plot sufficient for his wife Sarah and himself. “Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God

had power to do what he had promised.”¹⁴ Hebrews testifies: “These all died in faith, *not having received the promises*, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them... Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God.”¹⁵ **Jesus Christ**, the supreme example, who sends us as he was sent,¹⁶ being owner of the universe, obeyed his Father’s will till the cross, yet he died abandoned by all and possessing only the clothes he wore... However, as a result of that radical faith-obedience we, the spiritual descendents of Abraham and Christ, today count ourselves in the millions.

Something similar has also happened in each of our Ibero American nations. There was one or more generations of sacrificial sowing on the part of the initial bearers of the faith who, *without seeing hardly any results*, persisted in obeying their Captain, some of them even to the point of martyrdom... But the abundant harvest we see in our countries today is something that we owe to the foundation of faithfulness and obedience that they were willing to lay, much more than to any modern methods or strategies. Now it is our turn to express our gratitude, and settle our debt, doing the same for others!

Lord, send into Your harvest laborers who are committed to follow and obey Christ in everything, no matter what the cost!

3. Narcissistic activism

I have termed my third concern “narcissistic activism.” We live in an increasingly frantic age. When we return from North Africa to South America, I feel bewildered by the multiplicity of meetings and other programs the churches put on *inside* their sanctuaries, and the pressure that is exerted for *all* members to attend *all* those activities. The worrying part for me is that we seem to have no other aim than the *number* of attendees in our meetings, and that we are satisfied with simply *entertaining* the believers, maintaining superficial relationships lacking in authenticity or commitment.

We often allow our *programs*, including our missionary activities, to have greater importance than *persons*... sometimes even more than the **Person** who gave his all out of love for us. It would seem that we have forgotten that the most powerful and enduring appeal of the Christian faith is the Person of Jesus Christ, the possibility of having a

personal relationship with Someone so incomparably beautiful, and of being part of a family of persons who attempt to allow Him to reproduce in them His wonderful *personality*.

The scant attention that our evangelical activism dedicates to the personalized forming of the character of Christ in the believer seriously limits the possibility of carrying out the mission such as our Lord conceived and practiced it: “He ordained twelve, that they should *be with him*,”¹⁷ “make *disciples... teaching them to obey*,”¹⁸ “predestined to be *conformed to the likeness of his Son*,”¹⁹ “until Christ is *formed in you*,”²⁰ “to present every-one *perfect in Christ*.”²¹

There is one aspect of the formation of the character of Christ in us that He emphasized as fundamental for the world to be able to know Him: our love and our unity.²² In my years supervising missionary teams among Muslim peoples, what has saddened me the most is having to deal with unresolved interpersonal conflicts between brothers and sisters unable or unwilling to talk with sincerity about their problems, to forgive from the heart offenses suffered, to humble themselves, be reconciled and continue serving together for Jesus’ sake and in submission to the “new command” He left us.²³ Brothers, *the missionary candidate who has not demonstrated clearly in his character the cardinal Christian capability of forgiveness and reconciliation had best not go to witness abroad where he will only be negating with his life the message he proclaims!*

From the perspective of what the mission field requires, and related always to our Ibero American evangelical “narcissism”, there is one more thing I would like to mention: a witness excessively centered around our church buildings and based on terminology and rituals that the non-evangelical find hard to understand. Most evangelicals seem to know only one method of evangelism: invite the unbeliever to church! To be able to fulfill Jesus’ expectation that we be “light” and “salt”²⁴ in our neighborhoods and among the nations, we need to follow His example²⁵ and devote ourselves much more to leaving our enclosures to be “in the world” (without being “of the world!”), relating on a day-to-

12 Rom.14:8, 1Co.6:19-20.

13 Heb.11:6, 8, ff.; Jam.2:14-26; Jn.14.21-24. (It is interesting to see in the New Testament several expressions that use “*obey*” where nowadays we tend to use “believe”: “*obedience* to the faith”, “*obey* the gospel”, “*obey* the truth” (Acts 6:7; Rom.1:5, 2:8, 10:16, 16:26; Gal.3:1, 5:7; 2Tes.1:8; 1P.1:22, 4:17). —It is impossible to truly believe and not obey.

14 Rom.4:20-21.

15 Heb.11:13,16 (emphasis added).

16 Jn.20:21.

17 Mk.4:14.

18 Mt.28:19,20.

19 Rom.8:29.

20 Gal.4:19.

21 Col.1:28.

22 Jn.13:35; 17:21.

23 Jn.13:34; 1Jn.3:16; Fil.2:3-5.

24 Mt.5:13,14.

25 Mt.9:10-13; Lk.15:1.

day basis with people who would never go into our churches but who need to see or hear something of Jesus in us. Christ related our “light” with *good works* that He wanted us to do in our societies,²⁶ like He also did.²⁷ The reiterated biblical exhortation to dedicate ourselves to good works²⁸ which are visible expressions of God’s compassion and concern for people, is one that we as evangelicals need to learn to heed if we want to earn the privilege of being heard—let alone *believed!*—when we share the message of God’s love.

Lord, send into Your harvest laborers with the Spirit and character of Jesus, experienced in forgiveness and reconciliation, who know how to relate to people and how to demonstrate in practical ways Your goodness and mercy!

4. Evangelical Zionism

Living in an Arab context, it is frankly shocking to see the naivety with which so many Latin American evangelical churches have identified themselves with different aspects of Zionism (such as the prominent use of the Israeli flag), and the ease with which, in the name of a supposed “fulfillment of prophecy,” practically any act committed by someone from “the chosen people” is justified. I wonder if we have ever sat down to think how far this is from the *universal* message of all the biblical prophets and apostles, who did not shrink back from proclaiming the judgment of God on all *human* sin, showing *no favoritism or partiality*.²⁹

It is essential for us today, just like it was for the disciples of yesteryear,³⁰ to leave the fulfillment of prophecies and the details of eschatology in the hands of the sovereign Lord of history, and dedicate ourselves to the task He commended to us: to live and announce among *all* peoples (including the Jews) the only Gospel of salvation, that is through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ³¹ unto “*everyone* who believes.”³²

It seems to me that more or less related to this topic of evangelical Zionism is the tendency that I perceive in many evangelical circles to mix together the Kingdom of God and the national interests of countries where believers are numerous or influential.

Apparently, we believe that with the political, economic, or military power of *this world* we can advance the Kingdom that is “not of this world.”³³ When in the national press of many Muslim countries articles regularly appear attributing the bellicose foreign policy of the current president of the United States to his evangelical faith and the influence of evangelicals in North American politics, I cannot but worry about the credibility of the gospel message we are communicating to these peoples. And when I hear recognized Christian leaders publicly support, as supposed spokesmen of all the evangelical churches, undertakings such as the invasion of Iraq or the bombing of Lebanon, I can only wonder when and how “the good news of peace through Jesus Christ”³⁴ will come to be understood by Iraqi, Lebanese and Palestinian Muslims....

We would do well, as individuals and as churches, to decide clearly (just as Joshua and Elijah exhorted long ago³⁵), which kingdom do we want to represent—that of Jesus or someone else’s?—remembering that “no one can serve two masters.”³⁶

Lord, send into Your harvest laborers who are dedicated exclusively to Jesus, to His values and His kingdom, who show no partiality and who leave the future in Your hands!

5. Partisan arrogance

The last concern I want to mention is once again one that I believe can be perceived more easily from a place like the Muslim field, where the followers of Jesus, as far as we know, are more or less one out of every 50,000 people. Before the reality of so many unreached people groups, it is sad to hear of “missionary projects” that, in the end, are only efforts so that, in places that already have several evangelical churches, there may be one more “of our denomination.” The desire to “plant our flag,” whether as a church, denomination, or mission agency, usually has much more to do with fleshly pride than with the Spirit of Christ. Neither your denomination nor my agency will go to heaven, only persons redeemed by the blood of the Lamb... all together and all as one. In the country in which I serve, the leaders of the approximately forty small secret national churches (one for nearly every million inhabitants!) have said that they do not want to use, nor for anyone from the outside to impose on them, denomi-

national labels. They are simply members of *Kenisat Nur* (Church of “The Light”), or *Kenisa Kalimat Al Hayiat* (Church of “The Word of Life”), etc., from such and such a city. I believe that, as foreign workers, we should respect this desire. Will we be able to, or will our partisan arrogance betray us in the end?

Among the missionary agencies, at times, something similar happens: we end up having to “reinvent the wheel,” creating a whole other supervision and support structure, just because the agency that already has teams working in that place “is not ‘ours’ and in the end, whose will the results be?!” “My brothers, this should not be!”³⁷ Partisan or denominational (or ethnic or classist or nationalist) arrogance, just like any other *idolatry*, brings along with it a grave danger (like Nebuchadnezzar learned when boasting of his beautiful Babylon³⁸), because we are dealing with a jealous God, a consuming fire,³⁹ who resists the proud,⁴⁰ and will not give His glory to another.⁴¹

Lord, send into Your harvest laborers who are humble, who fear You and honor their brothers and sisters, who are big-hearted and open-minded, desirous of serving Jesus together with all “those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart!”⁴²

«Father, thank you for extending to us your immense and unmerited grace, for making us part of your purposes, your family, your Kingdom. Sanctify us, help us to throw off all these hindrances, all this weight and the sin that prevents us from giving ourselves entirely to completing the race that Jesus laid out for us. ⁴³ Send, from your Church in Ibero America, many laborers, called by You, anointed by your Spirit and determined to be servants for Jesus’ sake, to take ‘the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ’ to those peoples who have not yet experienced the blessing of knowing You as is only possible in the beautiful face of Jesus Christ. ⁴⁴ ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!’ ⁴⁵ Amen and amen!» <<

"Antonio Peralta is for security reasons a pseudonym"

26 Mt.5:16.

27 Acts 10:38.

28 Eph.2:10; 2Tim.6:18; Tit.2:14; 3:8.

29 Dt.10:17; 2Cr.19:7; Lk.20:21; Acts 10:34-35; Rom.2:11; Gal.2:6; Eph.6:9; Jam.2:1; 1P.1:17.

30 Acts 1:6-8.

31 Acts 4:12; 17:30-31; Gal.1:6-8, 2:14-16.

32 Jn.3:16, 12:46; Acts 13:39; Ro.1:16, 10:4; 1Jn.5:1.

33 Jn.18:36.

34 Acts 10:36.

35 Josh.24:15; 1K.18:21.

36 Mat.6:24.

37 Jam.3:10.

38 Dan.4:30-33.

39 Ex.34:14; Dt.4:23-24.

40 Jam.4:6; 1P.5:5.

41 Is.42:8.

42 2Tim.2:22.

43 Heb.12:1-2.

44 2Cor.4:4,6.

45 Rev.5:13.