

World Mission – Lessons from a “Closed” Country

*“God is moving by His Spirit
Moving through all the earth
Signs and wonders when God moves
Move, O Lord, in me”*

Revival in Latin America

Early in my adult life I was privileged to live and work in South America for several years. At the time, there had been an explosion in the numbers of people becoming Christians for the first time, particularly in Pentecostal or Charismatic churches. Entire communities were being drawn into that continent’s greatest spiritual outpouring since colonial times. For example, the Jotabeche Church in Santiago (Chile) boasted a membership of 80,000 people. Puerto Rican evangelist Yiye Avila was criss-crossing Latin America drawing hundreds of thousands of seekers into stadiums. In Brazil literally millions were converted to Christ. The Rey de Reyes (King of Kings) church in Buenos Aires and other congregations like it across Argentina attracted thousands of men and women, drawn by the simple proclamation of the Gospel, the liberation of communities from the bondages of legalistic traditions and non-Christian spiritual oppression and loud, long, joyful worship services.

I made up my mind to learn Spanish and get involved in the Latin American church. My work allowed me to do so (I was honoured to serve as Associate Pastor in the Templo Evangelico, a Pentecostal church in Lima, Peru and later on in Bethany Church in Caracas, Venezuela), but there were few people officially in Peru as missionaries. In fact, Peru was “closed” to missionaries. In the wake of a leftist military coup, most foreign Christian workers had been summarily expelled from the country and the Marxist government threatened to crack down on non-establishment churches. How could the church grow in the face of officially sponsored opposition?

God is greater than man’s antagonism. He always has a strategy to reach the lost. If we will work with him, we can be part of the Holy Spirit’s solution to “closed countries”, anywhere in the world, even Muslim states such as Saudi Arabia. We must never lose sight of the one central reality of world mission: God passionately loves the human race and will do anything to reach people with the Good News that Jesus came to redeem them and give them eternal life. Sometimes this will involve winning people to Christ in the heart of the establishment. At other times, it will mean granting unique favour to those who find strategies to work for Him under the very noses of those inimical to the work. This articles looks at a few of the issues, from a Latin American “closed country” perspective. I believe Father God wants us to learn what is best for the environments in which we are serving Him.

Is God Catholic or Protestant?

For nearly half a millennium Roman Catholics and Protestants have been engaged in a struggle for the hearts and minds of the “Christian” world. One of the underlying assumptions has been that those who belong to the “other” side are, by definition, living in error and outside of the saving grace of Christ. A Minister I knew once admitted to me that he believed it was conceivable a few Catholics “might” actually get to Heaven. According to his theology, there could be exceptions. Catholic friends, on the other hand, had it on “good authority” that no Protestant would make it, because they had spurned the authority and cover of Mother Church. Non-Catholics bridled at the term “Catholic” in church creeds. (The word means “universal”, surely a propos in describing the Body of Christ.) Church history courses in conservative seminaries majored on the destructive forces of “popish plots” implicated in wars across the European Christian heartlands over centuries. Catholics, on the other hand, pointed to the numbing effects of higher criticism and modernism that effectively gutted Christian teaching throughout Europe of revelation, authenticity and the power of God. The impact on the non-Christian world was, predictably, negative, as non-Christians pointed to pride, hatred, division, prejudice and internal contradictions amongst the followers of Jesus Christ as reasons for rejecting the Gospel. How could those who preached the Gospel of Love reach across the divide and impart the message?

When I lived in South America I encountered this division repeatedly. Roman Catholics pointed to the long history of their church on the Continent. Protestants, on the other hand, majored on the cruel methods frequently used by spiritual and temporal leadership in Europe to bring about European dominance in the New World, including slavery, genocide, inquisition and treachery, often committed in the name of Christ and His prelates. Protestant leaders warned about the influence of Marxism in the extant church. Bishops railed against those who abandoned the faith and embraced growing Protestant movements and the term “evangelico” was employed pejoratively.

God is neither Catholic nor Protestant. Jesus died for all, so that all who call on him in simple faith can be forgiven their sins and receive the gift of eternal life. Where church bodies do not cooperate with the Holy Spirit he finds a way around them.

Liberation Theology and Restrictive Policies

In a number of Latin American countries, left-leaning elements in the church reacted to the proliferation of (usually right-wing) dictatorships by adopting “liberation theology”, a misguided social movement that stemmed from a reappraisal of the church's role in poor and oppressed communities. Many clergy joined this Marxist-inspired struggle, which sought to reorganise society and abolish the systematic oppression of the poor. The “father” of liberation theology was a Peruvian priest called Gustavo Gutierrez. Gutierrez called for liberation of the poor through social action, including military means. He criticised capitalism, in so far as it discourages community and collective action. Throughout the hemisphere many people who responded to the call to

arms in the name of Christ used Old Testament passages to justify a “war of liberation”. From time to time I observed marches by thousands of protesters wearing red bandanas, carrying arms, calling for the overthrow of the Government in the name of reform and a secular Catholic Church.

Against this background, I was asked to meet with the Secretary-General of the Ministry of Interior in Lima, in connection with applications by Australian Protestant missionaries to establish themselves in Lima and work within the existing evangelical structures. Their applications for visas had been refused, but they were never given reasons. Intervention at the highest level, including representatives of the Australian Government, had not convinced Peruvian officials to change their position; no foreign missionaries would be allowed into the country until further notice. I asked the Secretary-General why this was so. Surely, I argued, there would be value in their working along side the poor and uneducated, teaching them to read and write, imparting life skills that would lead to a more literate republic. To my surprise, he admitted the moratorium had not emerged from the Peruvian Cabinet or Government Ministries, but the Archbishop. The reason: reliable intelligence had been received by church officials to the effect that five thousand Mormon missionaries from the United States planned to descend on Peru and make a concerted effort to proselytise throughout the country. This news caused alarm at the highest levels of the official church and it was decided the only way to prevent a Mormon “invasion” would be to close the door completely to foreign missionaries. No exceptions. There was no way the Australian applicants would even be considered. It was suggested they go to another country.

Many countries routinely refuse access to missionaries, for a host of reasons, including religious and political factors. Making the Gospel relevant to their populations in the new millennium requires new thinking, new access strategies and new tools, albeit with the same message.

Alabare a mi Senor (I will praise my Lord)

Is it possible for genuine Christians in closed societies to share the Gospel? I believe the Holy Spirit always has a plan.

I discovered that God had a strategy in Peru, that involved working within the existing structure. Literally hundreds of groups of Catholic Charismatic Christians sprang up across the city of Lima and the adjoining shanty towns (“Pueblos Jovenes” or young towns, where half of the population of greater Lima live). Those who participated loved God. I attended dozens of their meetings, as a visitor, joining in singing new songs of worship and studying the Bible.

If the Gospel is going to be relevant, it will be so where people live. To focus outreach on an expectation that millions will simply leave the institutional church because a foreigner asks them to do so is simplistic. Some may do so; others won't, if they find Jesus Christ within their own culture.

The Peruvian Catholic Charismatic community was criticised by evangelicals and Western missionaries, but it made inroads into otherwise “closed” towns and suburbs. I met priests and youth leaders who told me they had gone beyond their vows and made personal professions of faith in Christ as the basis of their salvation and believed in the Baptism in the Holy Spirit for power to witness. As they did so, reaching out to their own parishes and in schools and universities, they were accepted and spoke with new authority. Naturally, they had enemies, including members of the powerful church hierarchies, who wanted to preserve old ecclesiastical and syncretistic forms, as well as rigid authority structures. However, “the Word of God is not bound” and the work they did had impacts in countless lives. In many respects, Catholic Charismatics in Peru may have been the logical counterpoint to Liberation Theologians who were passionate about the kind of society they wanted to build but lacked personal relationships with God and a Biblical paradigm.

Meanwhile, deep in the jungle

A parallel development was the ongoing impact of Bible translators working in the jungle areas of Peru on behalf of Wycliffe, or the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL). I visited a SIL base located on the Ucuyali River at Yarinacocha, near Pucallpa. There, surrounded on most sides by the Peruvian jungle, SIL had established an amazing facility for Bible translation.

Over a period of several days one of the directors took me through the facility. I talked to pilots, who carried translators to remote jungle clearings in a fraction of the time formerly taken by boat. I sat with translators and informants, as they patiently incarnated the Greek and Hebrew Scriptures in languages that had never before been exposed to the outside world and codified in written form. I listened with amazement at the stories of men and women who had given their lives to working for Christ in such a remote place. I then visited jungle clearings where indigenous Indians (brothers and sisters in Christ) lived and carved out subsistence lives.

Not that the base was lacking in modern facilities. The most refreshing part of the visit was a tour of the computer facility, where the latest programs were used to manipulate complex databases with dictionaries and translation tools to develop hitherto untranslated drafts of the Scriptures. The centre was air conditioned twenty-four hours a day, using generators; this was a tremendous relief from the oppressive heat and humidity that prevailed outside. The base had its detractors, including anthropologists who believed missionaries should not penetrate other cultures, but the work being done was of eternal value, the story of God’s love and redemption for all ethnic groups, in all generations, across God’s world.

On 4 October 1979 the Peruvian Ministry of Education signed the first of a series of contracts with SIL, to produce primers in languages that were then being committed to written form for the first time. They were the only organisation with the training, skills, experience, acceptance and track record to undertake such a feat. What was unique about this contract was that SIL was being actively encouraged to remain in Peru at a time when missionaries

had been, or were being expelled, by the leftist military government then in power. None of the senior staff of President Juan Velasco was particularly interested in evangelism of remote tribes, however by adding value to the country's education system SIL managed to find a niche that enabled them to continue their important work, with the imprimatur of the Government. Even a notionally atheistic Government can see the relevance of Christian work. In November 1981, the Peruvian President Fernando Belaunde Terry presented William Cameron Townsend (Uncle Cam), the founder of SIL with the *Orden del Sol*, the highest service award given to a civilian. The work goes on.

There are no "closed countries"

Many so-called "closed" countries are not closed at all, just limited access societies. If Christians are flexible in terms of entry methodologies; operational strategies; options for working on the ground (including tent-making, or employment in secular jobs while unofficially actively undertaking the work of mission); and are prepared to trust the Holy Spirit to energise and use believers in other denominations, they will be able to reach such societies effectively with the Gospel.