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Biblical Evangelism in Hispanic Ministry

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The Christian mission effort is central to gauging the faithfulness of the church to the command of Christ: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). Often, however, only a relatively small portion of the ecclesiastical budget is designated for missions. The organizational mind-set usually understands missionary outreach as *foreign* missionary work. Tragically, however, many eyes are not yet open to the fact that the United States is itself a "foreign" mission field for all practical purposes.

General Observations

When we speak of outreach to hispanics in particular, we should consider these facts: The United States has a larger hispanic population than *all* the Central American countries combined, and the United States is the fourth largest Spanish-speaking country in the world (even though Spanish is the official language of twenty countries). Although the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has worked among hispanics for more than sixty years, our mission effort in this area has been limited and, in reality, there has been little interest in hispanic ministry until relatively recent times. Even now, there is a great deal of misunderstanding of the hispanic culture and lack of effective evangelistic methods in the area of hispanic ministry.

Historically, the lack of interest in hispanic ministry, both in this country and abroad, is probably due to the false conception that Latin Americans are a people familiar with the gospel, since they have a long history of association with the Roman Catholic Church. Any history of Latin America would record, indeed, that it was conquered and colonized by the Spanish in the late fifteenth century and that this colonization was motivated, in part, by the desire to evangelize the pagan people of the Americas. The Spanish crown dispatched, with its conquistadors, Roman Catholic monks and priests who had as a prime objective and directive the "christianization" of the native inhabitants. The long history of Roman Catholicism in Latin America has resulted in cultures that are permeated with Christian symbols and rituals. An in-depth study, however, of the Roman Catholic Church as it has developed in much of Latin America would lead to the conclusion that Latin Romanism is

replete with pagan ideas and practices. Syncretistic ritual has developed in the place of scripturally based trinitarian devotion. In order to evangelize the hispanic community effectively it is necessary to understand its Roman Catholic roots and the role of the Roman Church in the formation of the hispanic persona.

Religious idiosyncrasies in Latin American culture also include an anti-Protestant bias, and thus the evangelization of hispanics has been particularly difficult for traditional non-papal churches such as the Lutheran church. Poor results, however, have been due not only to the difficulty of the task by virtue of various barriers. They are also due to a lack of understanding of these barriers and of cultural idiosyncrasies in general and to the lack of culturally sensitive *methods* of evangelization which, at the same time, avoid the trap of adopting what might be called a culturally sensitive theology.

Methods employed in outreach to hispanics need to be of unique design because of very basic cultural dynamics. The hispanic is a very social individual. His personal identity is defined by his group identities—families, friends, communities, and so forth. He distrusts the impersonal. Personal contact is the basic building block of interpersonal relationships. Generally, until a bond of trust is established by personal contact, no relationship can form. Churches attempting to work among the hispanic people must operate with this fact as a basic premise. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has not fully understood this cultural dynamic. The Anglo-American Lutheran prizes his individual space and privacy. It has often been difficult for Anglo-Americans, including pastors, to adopt the personal approach required for evangelization among hispanic people. In addition to a basic attitude, there is a complex set of unwritten cultural rules involved in the forging of interpersonal relationships which must first be understood and then be implemented.

The "personal" approach described as being necessary in the hispanic context has been often greatly misunderstood by others. The term "personal" does not mean "familiar." The Latin culture also has a very pronounced sense of respect of persons of different sexes, ages, educational levels, and classes, with layers of proprieties which lend a good deal of distance to many relationships. This

dynamic is very intricate, sometimes subtle, and has proven difficult for many outside the culture to understand accurately. Sensitivity, creativity, cultural education, and a desire to serve the hispanic community are required of Anglo-American pastors who wish to maneuver successfully in hispanic ministry. Such pastors, at the same time, not only need to translate a knowledge of culture into effective methods of evangelism, but also need a certain level of academic preparation and advanced theological training to communicate to others the profound truths of Scripture and to command respect as an identifiable leader in the community.

The Latin culture requires that the pastor himself perform evangelistic visits, since it has a very defined sense of respect for authority and academic preparation; it is not only comfortable with a strong leader but is, indeed, accustomed to such a figure. Unless a trusting relationship is established with the man perceived to be the central figure, the pastor himself, it is unlikely that the hispanic will respond to any evangelistic effort. This individual sense of trust must be established, not only because of the hispanic's distrust of the impersonal, but also because the barrier of cultural anti-Protestant prejudice can generally be broken only on a personal level. Ordinarily, the pastor has to identify with the hispanic first on a cultural level. This cultural "alignment" is necessary to counteract the natural suspicion of someone who is, admittedly, foreign to the hispanic religious tradition (and rightly so). This personal identification must be combined with heavy and steady doses of biblical education and a gentle redirection of beliefs which are supported only by empty tradition, thus replacing christo-paganism with true catholic orthodoxy. The process is a gradual one of leading people, through their own study of the Holy Scriptures, to a personal encounter with the living Christ whom the Bible proclaims and who works through its words repentance and faith.

The need is great, and the right time is now. The Lord has brought to the doorsteps of our churches a people hungry for the true gospel. Statistical data on the hispanic population in the United States, particularly in the Southwest, reveals facts which are equally evident when one visits the kindergarten of any public school in Los Angeles. More than sixty percent of the pupils in the early primary

grades in the Los Angeles School District are hispanic. Information provided by the United States Bureau of the Census reveals that the hispanic population of the nation grew by thirty-nine percent between 1980 and 1990. There are indications that, by the turn of the century, just eight years away, the number of hispanics in this country will swell to thirty-five million or more. The hispanic population in the United States has, indeed, been growing five times as fast as the Anglo-American population. Much of this growth is attributable to the ratio of births to deaths. In 1980 the hispanic birth-rate was 23.5 live births per thousand members of the population compared to 14.2 for Anglo-Americans. The trend indicates that this gap has been significantly widening in each succeeding year. Hispanic congregations are noted for the youthfulness of their membership and so provide considerable promise for the future of hispanic ministry.

Immigration also, of course, has contributed significantly to the growing numbers of hispanics in this country. Demographers and political and social scientists who study patterns of migration concur that a steady flow of migration from Mexico and the rest of Latin America is sure to continue for the foreseeable future despite legislation discouraging immigration and increased efforts to tighten American borders. The reasons given for this continuous flow from Mexico include the following: the immensity of the Mexican population; its rapid growth resulting from a young population with a high birth-rate; a porous border between Mexico and the United States, spanning some two thousand miles, which is easily accessible to the urban centers of the American Southwest (from Los Angeles it is only two and a half hours by automobile to the Mexican border); and an economy in Mexico which, while expected to progress significantly in this decade, will probably always lag behind the economy of the United States.

The phenomenon of the youthfulness of the hispanic population, with a median age of under twenty-five years, in a society which is rapidly aging, with a median age of non-hispanics over thirty-five years, has some interesting implications for the future of this country.¹ Thirty-four percent of the nation's hispanics live in California. Hispanics are projected to be twenty-nine percent of the

general population of California by the turn of the century and to be thirty-eight percent of the state's population by the year 2020. Twenty-one percent of hispanics live in Texas. Ten percent of hispanics live in New York and eight percent in Florida. Eight percent of hispanics live in New Mexico, Colorado, and Arizona combined.

A group of analysts reviewing data collected in the census of 1990 has reported that the ordinary use of the Spanish language among hispanics has increased from sixty-eight percent in 1984 to seventy-two percent in 1989. More than ninety-seven percent of hispanics learned Spanish as their first language. Nationally, nine out of ten hispanics feel more comfortable speaking Spanish than English.

One of the most interesting pieces of data collected in constructing a profile of the author's previous congregation (Iglesia Luterana del Redentor) in Panorama City, California, related to dependence on the Spanish language or preference thereof. The membership was found to be composed of the following groups: forty-two percent of the members were born in Mexico or another Latin American country and were dependent on the Spanish language; another sixteen percent of the members (primarily young children) were predominantly Spanish-speaking but born in the United States; seventeen percent of the members, while born in a Latin American country, were predominantly English-speaking (in most cases because they came to this country when young and went through the American school system) yet preferred to worship in Spanish. A final twenty-five percent of the members were both predominantly English-speaking and born in the United States and yet they too preferred to worship in Spanish. Thus, a full forty-two percent of the congregation could theoretically have worshipped in English yet desired instead to worship in Spanish with a hispanic congregation. Such data may help to dispel the notion that hispanic ministry is a transitional ministry expected to have a limited life span while Spanish-speakers gain competence in the English language.

The need is evident to reach out to hispanics in the Spanish language. Lutheran churches need to meet this need to be faithful to the Great Commission. To this end churches need to implement programs that will meet, where possible, the cultural requirements

of hispanics. Basic to creating an environment congenial to the evangelization of hispanics is a program of visitation which is of culturally sensitive design. A base of trust needs to be established between the hispanic community and the pastor. Furthermore, this link needs to be forged on the home ground of the hispanic community.

Visitation in the Book of Acts

Christian outreach involving personal evangelism in the home and within the context of the extended family is not a new approach. When the Lord Jesus commissioned His followers to "make disciples," the apostles, following in the Master's footsteps, set out spreading the word person to person. They spoke in open-air forums, in synagogues, and in any meeting-place where the good news could be proclaimed. Any and every opportunity was seized to share the love of Jesus Christ with lost souls in the midst of a pagan society.

The second volume of St. Luke, the Acts of the Apostles, relates the missionary travels of the apostles and the evangelistic activity of the first-century Christians. The Book of Acts spans approximately thirty years of history, from 33 to 63 A.D. While not intended to be a complete history of the apostolic church, it does relay some notable and striking accounts of the work of evangelization; and many argue, indeed, that it is intended to present a "model" of specific implementation of the Great Commission.²

A particularly effective method of evangelism, highlighted in key passages, is that which took place in the homes of families. The *oikos* served as a natural conduit for the Christian message for many reasons. The extended family as the "house" of someone was a fundamental unit of society and had a long tradition in Israelite and Roman culture. Michael Green observes:

The work of Jeremias (and Stauffer) among others has shown how fundamental to God's economy of salvation in Israel was the house. It is Noah and his house who are brought into the covenant, David and his house to whom the kingdom is promised, and so forth.³

The pagan hellenistic society in which the early Christians operated was often, to be sure, a hostile environment, suspicious of a faith that had as a central figure a Savior who died on a cross. Because of what were seen as strange and disturbing practices, such as the sharing of the body and blood of Christ in worship and the practice of evangelizing common people, these first-century Christians were not only held in contempt but were also subject to civil and criminal penalties by the larger society.⁴ In spite of the dangers, however, we see the homes of the first-century Christians being used both as vehicles for evangelism and as places for worship ("house churches"). The first Christians gathered daily for worship and instruction in various private homes according to Acts 2:46-47 and Acts 5:42. When Peter was liberated from Herod's jail by God's angel, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. There he found many people gathered in prayer (Acts 12:12).

A specific application of the *oikos* was the use of the home to evangelize groups of related individuals. The extended family, including kith and kin and servants, was a concept very familiar to Jewish society. God entered into legally binding relationships with Noah and his "house" and Abraham and his "house." The large "family" of the household was an ideal environment for evangelization because of its patriarchal leadership and the level of trust and comfort existing in the private domain of the home. This unity, after all, is something which the church embodies above all—as the community of Christ and, indeed, the family of God.

According to Acts 18:7-8, Paul visited the house of Titus Justus, whose house was contiguous to the synagogue. There a principal member of the synagogue was invited with his entire family. After instruction they became believers, and all were baptized. A similar case was the jailer of Philippi, to whom Paul spoke of Jesus. The jailer and his entire house believed and were baptized (Acts 16:32-34).

There was, above all, the case of Peter's visit to the home of Cornelius the Centurion. Peter arrived in Caesarea, having been sent for the express purpose of instructing Cornelius and his family in the Christian faith. Cornelius had gathered his entire household, that is, his immediate family and servants, other relatives, and his most

intimate friends. Luke gives this account (Acts 10:22-24), proceeding from the arrival at Peter's place of lodging of three men whom Cornelius had sent to seek him:

22. And they said: "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say."

23. So Peter called them in to be his guests. The next day he rose and went off with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him.

24. And on the following day they entered Ceasarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his kinsmen and close friends.

Peter thereupon instructed the group, they believed, and they were baptized. Acts 10 provides, indeed, a canonical model of evangelistic visitation to which additional attention will yet be paid. In any case, Paul summarizes the approach of person-to-person evangelism in the context of the convocation in Acts 20:

20. I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable and from teaching you in public and from house to house.

Such evangelism done within the home, specifically in the context of extended families, is, in fact, a model which can still be successfully applied today—certainly in hispanic contexts. The basic reason is that the cultural mores common to all hispanics attach particular significance to the home in identifying the extended "family." The home is that private domain which only those may enter who have established relationships of blood or trust. Relationships of trust are cultivated by direct and personal interaction. The personal methods used by Peter and Paul to introduce first-century families to the faith are still effective today in evangelizing hispanics.

The Purpose of the Author's Project

Several years ago this essay's author undertook to devise a home-based program, directed specifically to hispanics, of pastoral

teaching and devotions drawn from Peter's experience with the family and friends of Cornelius at Caesarea as outlined in Acts 10. The purposes were to provide a culturally acceptable method of introducing hispanics to the local church and to facilitate the teaching of the scriptural truths revealed by God, thereby allowing, if God should so will, growth in the membership of the local congregation.

The theory was that visitors to a home Bible study hosted by a member of the local congregation and conducted by the pastor would be more likely to attend a service or class in the church than visitors invited by a member of the local congregation but with no prior contact with the pastor. Participating in the study were three groups of members of the local congregation. The first group was a hosting group consisting of ten randomly selected families. The second group was a control group consisting of another ten randomly selected families which did not participate in the organized home visitation program. The rest of the families of the congregation were included in a third group, to compare and test the validity of the findings. Over the three-month test period, forty-seven adults participated in the home Bible study program as guests. Sixteen of the guests had never visited the local congregation. Of these, eleven people subsequently attended a worship service in the church (representing sixty-eight percent of the group) and five sought entrance to the pastor's membership class within four months of first participating in the program. There were no new visitors resulting from the control group in the same period.

The evangelism program of Bible studies in private homes was based on the personal approach seen throughout the New Testament—including the ministry of Jesus Himself—personal contact in a familiar and non-threatening environment. His apostles, carrying on the work given to them by Jesus, had not only the Master's example to follow, but also the constant direction and assistance of the Holy Spirit. Peter's visit with Cornelius the Centurion in Acts 10 is a model both in content and structure of a churchly visitation program. Peter addresses a kinship-group in the privacy of Cornelius' home. He summarizes the saving work of Jesus Christ and presents the central articles of the Christian faith, closing with

an explanation of the Great Commission and providing an opportunity for those present to receive the Savior's promise of salvation through baptism.

1. Acts 10:21-22

And Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one for whom you are looking. What is the reason for your coming?" And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, [is] an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation . . ."

In order to facilitate Peter's visit to the house of Cornelius there was some planning and preparation. The men whom Cornelius sent related the background of Cornelius and presented his credentials so that credibility, cultural acceptability, and vicarious respect were established as the invitation was extended and before the visit took place. Similarly, preparation is necessary if home Bible studies are to be used today in a program of direct evangelism. A congregational member who has been selected to invite guests to his home in such a program prepares the guests for the pastor's visit by telling them about the church and its pastor by way of introduction. On the other side, too, before the visit is made, the pastor is informed in outline of the background of those guests who are to be attending for the first time. This preparation on each side makes for a certain level of comfort in the initial meeting and facilitates cultural and social connections.

2. Acts 10:22.

"Cornelius . . . was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say."

According to Acts 10 Cornelius was "a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms liberally to the people, and prayed constantly to God" (Acts 10:2). He was, in other words, a man who spent time studying the word of God and heeding it. Verse 22, likewise, shows how attentive Cornelius was to the message which was sent to him by God. Today both pastors and the members of the congregations which they serve need to hear the urging of the Holy Spirit—in His word—to "make disciples."

3. *Acts 10:24.*

And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his kinsmen and close friends.

Verse 24 depicts Cornelius as preparing for Peter's visit by calling together the members of his extended "family"—that is, kinsmen and close friends in addition to his immediate household. Cornelius was anxious to share whatever message Peter would give with those who were closest to him. Similarly, members of modern congregations can share the good news with the people closest to them by inviting them to listen to the pastor's exposition of the word of God in private homes—members of the extended family, close neighbors, friends in the work-place, and others.

4. *Acts 10:26.*

When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshipped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up. I too am a man."

Peter had to educate Cornelius and those whom he had gathered in his house concerning the role of a teacher of the gospel as a humble (although, of course, still authoritative) servant of the Lord. Peter informed Cornelius that, although the representative of God, he too was a sinful mortal. Today, likewise, when a pastor is conducting a Bible study in the home of one of his members with guests present who are unacquainted with Lutheranism, he too must communicate clearly his role by the way in which he speaks and acts. The difference between the hierarchy of Roman Catholicism and the pastorate of the Lutheran Church should be obvious to all the pastor's hearers.

5. *Acts 10:27-28.*

And as he talked with them, he went in and found many people gathered; and he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean."

Peter dealt first with the cultural prejudices which must be confronted at the outset before any teaching can be done. In this particular case, of course, the Holy Spirit had already prepared both Cornelius and Peter to accept the cultural differences between them. Certainly, then, in leading a Bible study in a home where hispanics are present who are unacquainted with Lutheranism, the contemporary pastor must first deal in some way with the general orientation in Latin America toward religious tradition and limited use of the Bible. It may suffice to emphasize the positive side: the foundation of Christian belief is found specifically in the Holy Bible, which as the very word of God deserves to be read and heard, studied and heeded. If in this way some of the cultural prejudice against approaching Holy Scripture directly, the divine word itself, through its use, will then break down other barriers of ignorance and prejudice.

6. Acts 10:30-32.

And Cornelius said, "Four days ago, about this hour, I was keeping the ninth hour of prayer in my house; and, behold, a man stood before me in bright apparel, saying, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the seaside.'"

Cornelius informed Peter briefly how the Holy Spirit had prepared him to receive the teaching which God was using the apostle to bring him. In modern evangelism, too, in the context of a home Bible study (as opposed to a worship service), brief remarks by the host concerning God's guidance—especially His saving grace—in his own life may be in place, in accord with the pastor's judgment. The pastor himself may speak briefly at times of God's grace in his own life. In the hispanic context *occasional* remarks of this sort serve to increase respect for the teacher and so reinforce the credibility of his teaching. Of much more significance is the reference to the prayers of Cornelius. The pastor begins, of course, every teaching session with a prayer invoking God's presence and asking His will to be done in the lives of all those present.

7. *Acts 10:33.*

"So I sent to you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here present in the sight of God, to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord."

On behalf of the entire group gathered in his house Cornelius expressed the willingness to hear what God had instructed Peter to say. In this way, again, the host demonstrated a respect for the teacher which would tend to be seconded by the guests who were present by virtue of a previously established respect for the host.

8. *Acts 10:34-43.*

And Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him. You know the word which He sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace by Jesus Christ—He is the Lord of all—the word which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how He went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. And we are witnesses to all that He did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put Him to death by hanging Him on a tree, but God raised Him on the third day and made Him manifest. And He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that He is the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name.

Despite the importance of all the preparatory and auxiliary points considered so far, the heart of Peter's message to the family and friends of Cornelius was, of course, the gospel of Jesus Christ (in the broad sense of the word "gospel," that is, subsuming the divine law as well). The apostle proclaimed the one true God who is the ruler of all, whose law is all-inclusive and whose love is all-embracing. So great, indeed, is His love that He sent His only-begotten Son to

give us the "good news" of that love. This message was to be made available to all men of all nations.

Peter built, in his presentation of the gospel, on the knowledge which Cornelius and his companions already had of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. Similarly, the Lutheran pastor today can begin with some central truths of Christianity already known to those of a Roman Catholic background. He can then expand on them, indicating the biblical evidence and the connections with other biblical truths.

By virtue of being both God and sinless man Jesus was able to carry to completion—by dying on the cross and rising again—a ministry here on earth which satisfied God's wrath against all sinners and so gave us all "peace" with Him once more. This ministry of Jesus we know and understand from the personal witness and unerring interpretation of His disciples. Both Cornelius and we today have the story of salvation from the same source—Cornelius from the mouth of an apostle and we from the writings composed by apostles or authorized by them.

Peter closed his presentation with God's promise that all who, repenting of sin, believe in Jesus Christ eternally enjoy the forgiveness of sins which He accomplished. Thus, Peter taught, in effect, Cornelius and company all the articles of faith summarized in the Apostles' Creed.

9. Acts 10:47-48.

Then Peter declared, "Can anyone forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

The result of Peter's proclamation of the gospel was its creation of saving faith in the hearts of the hearers. The Holy Spirit continued His work as Peter baptized those present in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, thus sealing them unto eternal life. The new converts, at the same time, quite rightly earnestly desired to *continue* hearing and studying the word of

God—immediately and, no doubt, to the end of earthly life. Peter's visit, then, to the house of Cornelius provides a powerful model of evangelism connected with Bible study conducted in private homes. Acts 10 clearly shows the need that existed in the first century to break down social barriers and to communicate the biblical truth of salvation through Jesus Christ in a culturally sensitive way.

Since that time the world may have made some notable technological advances, but in matters of ultimate importance it has made no advance—or perhaps has deteriorated further. There remain, of course, a great variety of barriers between people and between peoples. The example of Peter in the home of Cornelius is as timely today as it was more than nineteen centuries ago. Some elements, to be sure—such as the miraculous sign of speaking in foreign languages which the speakers had never studied (verses 45-46)—relate specifically to the unique presence in the church of the apostolate, and so we should act wrongly if we attempted to reproduce all aspects of the occurrence. A program of home Bible studies, however, which incorporates the appropriate elements of Peter's approach to Cornelius and company, as discussed above, remains a valuable evangelistic tool in hispanic contexts. The basic reason, humanly speaking, is that the hispanic community in many ways still operates along the same lines as the family-based societies of the first century in terms of the importance and intimacy of the home. In human terms, again, the success of the program hinges on the non-threatening and, indeed, intimate atmosphere in which the word of God is studied and the gospel is presented. A pivotal aspect of this ambience is the personal rapport established between the pastor and the guests of his parishioners.

Communicating Cross-Culturally

Those who are called by God (through His church) to serve the Lord as pastors have a special responsibility to minister to others, both inside and outside of the church. The occupants of the pastoral office are charged with feeding His flock of sheep with His word and sacraments (John 21:17). In addition, however, pastors are the special deputies of Christ in seeking the lost sheep that are still outside the fold (Luke 15:4-7).

The challenge is to communicate that saving message of Christ to the people within one's reach in a way that can penetrate social-cultural barriers in addition to the personal barriers common to all sinners. Pastors must know and understand our people in order to reach them. To this end we can profitably look to the missionary methods used by God Himself—in sending His only-begotten Son to live as flesh and blood among us, making us His brothers. He became a participant in the human experience in a real and practical sense. The main principle, of course, is that God became a man to be able to take upon Himself the sins of men, for which He atoned on the cross and thus allowed us to partake with joy of eternal salvation. More specifically, however, His presence among us involved His participation in His particular time and culture, in the same way as any of His people here on earth.

As the New Testament recounts, Jesus came to share the human experience with us, to understand in a very personal way the nature of "humanness." In the course of His public ministry, indeed, He proclaimed His Father's love to a people that He truly understood, on the human level, because He had been born into that particular culture, heritage, and history. In all probability, in fact, He spent thirty years coming to understand His people in its historical setting before He began His public ministry. The result was clearly a profound and intimate knowledge of a people and its culture.

In the incarnation we see the primary and, indeed, the foundational instance of the messenger whom God has sent forth learning to know from the inside the people to whom He was to minister—in His case literally taking on the skin of people. Taking on the skin of others in a figurative sense—that is, trying to understand and empathize with the life and feelings of a people as fully as possible—to be an instrument of God's love is, indeed, central to the idea of mission in general. Herbert Kane argues in this way:

... to base the world mission of the Christian church solely on the Great Commission is to miss the whole thrust of biblical revelation. The missionary obligation of the church would have been just as imperative if Jesus had not spoken those words.⁵

In sharing our human experience Jesus dealt directly with people on a personal level, coming to know their ways of thinking and speaking and using that knowledge to communicate His message in the most effective manner. In all such ways as are appropriate to mere mortals we Christians should, of course, strive always to imitate Christ; specifically, therefore, within mortal limitations, we should use His method of evangelism as the golden standard of missionary work. Thus, to reach those whom we wish to become members of the community of faith that confesses Christ, it is essential that we know the most effective method of communicating the saving message of the gospel to those particular people. Such a principle means "studying" the people whom God has placed before us as closely as possible—as much as possible, therefore, from inside the culture (living among them, speaking with them, eating with them, and the like).

People are complicated beings with complex patterns of personal behavior and social customs. To know a people one must study the history of the community, the culture, the customs, and the attitudes (psycho-social, economic, and religious). It is not enough that missionaries undertake the study of the language (although linguistic ability is critical) or become familiar with a country's typical cuisine. There is a great deal of useful literature by hispanics themselves (social scientists, anthropologists, novelists, and others) which can be studied. In addition, there is a wealth of written material by non-hispanic authors, including many church workers, who have taken the idea of empathy so seriously as to live the life of hispanic people and who have then described the experience from a historical, sociological, or anthropological perspective so as to assist others in understanding the various hispanic peoples. As harvesters in God's field, pastors cannot usually devote the thirty years which Jesus gave to the personal study of a culture. There is, however, in the first place, a great deal available that will allow one to understand something of the words and actions if not the thoughts of a people. Such academic study, prosecuted in a systematic fashion, is essential. To achieve true empathy, however, it is also necessary to live and move among the people whom one wishes to serve. More requisite than a certain quantity of time spent with the people is an attitude. Ordinarily those pastors are appreciated most

who exude a real love for the people they serve; and self-giving love is, in the final analysis, the only appropriate approach to take in ministering to people of another culture.

A Case Study in Historical Perspective: Mexico and the Spanish Conquest

The hispanic community of America has a long history and rich tradition. Before its annexation by the United States, after all, what we now call the American Southwest was the Mexican Northwest. Most of the territory, indeed, which now comprises the United States was at one time Spanish. Some attention, then, is surely due to hispanic history in any study of America in general. In any case, however, some knowledge of that history is certainly necessary to attaining some sense of the forces which shape the hispanic community of modern America and specifically its religious attitudes. Such an understanding is essential to planning an appropriate ministry to hispanics.

In areas of large concentrations of hispanics, such as in the area of Los Angeles, a considerable variety of hispanic origins may be found. There are, on the one hand, many regional differences within so large a country as Mexico (which spans some two and a half thousand miles), and there are even greater national differences separating the various peoples of Mexico, the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. There are, at the same time, points of convergence for all hispanics involving a common language and common historical and cultural connections with Spain. When ministering to a hispanic community which includes people from different Latin American countries, it is necessary to emphasize the points of commonality while seeing the differences as contributing a rich texture to the life of the community. In the author's former congregation in Panorama City some thirteen different countries were represented: Mexico, Cuba, Chile, Puerto Rico, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Peru, Argentina, Guatemala, Ecuador, Venezuela, Brazil and, of course, the United States of America. There are, in addition, those people who consider themselves Mexican but who were born in America and, indeed, whose parents or even grandparents may

have been born here. Considering as well the variety of economic and social classes included in many a hispanic congregation, one might wonder how these people could ever consider themselves a homogeneous unit. The fact that they do stems from ties to a common language, history, and culture which are so strong that they have not been lost in the supposed "melting-pot" that is American life.

The majority of American hispanics, however, are of Mexican origin. As a Mexican himself, the author has understandably chosen the country and subculture with which he is most familiar in the following summary of the relationship between hispanic history and the continuing religious attitudes of the majority of hispanics in America. As previously intimated, however, because most of Latin America has a common history in connection with Spain, much of the historical and cultural experience of Mexico which has produced the religious perspective of the typical Mexican is the common experience of Latin America in general.

During the observance of the fifth centennial of the arrival of Columbus in America in 1492, we were reminded that one of the primary goals of the Spaniards in the New World was its "christianization." In fact, however, this process resulted in the fusion of Christianity and indigenous polytheism in Latin America which missiologists and social anthropologists have labeled "christo-paganism" (*christo-paganismo*). What emerged in Latin America and continues today is a syncretism in which the native paganism predating the conquest has been dressed in the garments of a Spanish Roman Catholic tradition which in itself, prior to transplantation, was not completely Christian.

The era of the Spanish conquest in the Americas coincides, of course, with the time of the Counter-Reformation in Europe. King Philip II of Spain wanted to be the "champion of the faith," and his express purpose in subjugating the New World, even prior to very powerful economic goals, was the evangelization of the pagans in a speedy and sure manner.⁶ What the Spanish conquistadors found in Mexico and the rest of Latin America were Indian civilizations, such as the Aztec and Mayan, which were quite advanced in medicine, mathematics, architecture, and art. They also had sophisticated

social orders and military organizations.⁷

Because the method of evangelism used by the Spanish conquistadors was to be swift and sure, the pre-Columbian temples had to be obliterated and "Christianity" firmly implanted, often at the point of a sword. Franciscan and Dominican monks baptized Indians by the thousands. One of the early Franciscan missionaries, Peter of Ghent, wrote in 1529 that he and a colleague often baptized fourteen thousand in one day and together had administered the rite to more than two hundred thousand.⁸

The indigenous culture which the conquistadors found in Mexico was exceedingly polytheistic, "owing to the Aztecs' custom of adopting the divinities of conquered tribes, along with belief in the great gods, who controlled the principal forces of nature and various forms of human activity."⁹ Aztec temples were destroyed and replaced with shrines dedicated to Christian virgins and saints who often bore striking resemblances to the destroyed Aztec idols. An oft-cited example is the famed Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, which was constructed on the site where the temple of the Aztec mother-goddess Tonantzin had stood.¹⁰

The Spaniards demanded total and immediate acceptance of Christianity without allowing time for instruction in the new faith. The threats of death, however, used by Hernán Cortés and his successors, while producing numerical success, often resulted in the mere appearance of submission. The Aztecs adored the Christian virgin while thinking of Nahuatl, something which was easy to do when the church stood in the same place as the temple had stood before and when the image of the virgin was usually made similar to the image of Nahuatl. In the same way, the native people venerated the Virgin of Carmen while thinking of Tlaloc; they prayed to Saint Isidro while thinking of Xochiquetzal or Xochiquipilli; they honored Our Lady of Santa Ana and thought of the goddess Tlaxcala; and they worshiped Jesus while thinking of Huitzilopochtli.¹¹

The Roman Catholic usage of the sixteenth century embraced many traditions that were familiar and readily acceptable to the native people. Some of these (such as the burning of candles and

incense and the observance of feast days) were biblical and could have been God-pleasing if used rightly—to His glory alone. Unfortunately the Roman Catholicism of Europe had already incorporated such pagan practices as acts of penance and praying to saints and even the aforesaid biblical practices were abused to these pagan ends. It was, then, this already compromised form of European Christianity which fused in the New World with the indigenous paganism striving to placate the forces of nature. The result was the syncretism which survives and thrives in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America today.

Modern Mexico and Its Culture-Bound Syncretism

The fusion of corrupted Christianity and aboriginal superstition is so complete that no contradiction is recognized in combining acts of magic with Roman Catholicism. In Mexico spiritualists (*espiritistas*), shamans (*curanderos*), and witches (*brujos*) provide everyday services for the common man. For example, such practitioners of magic perform *limpias* or "spiritual cleansings" with plants, herbs, chiles, or eggs which are thought to absorb invisible evil forces which are harming someone.¹² They burn candles and incense and recite prayers before altars upon which are placed the cross of Christ or an image of a particular patron saint, possibly turned upside down. They are, these people insist, "good Catholics" and claim that their powers are a gift from God.

Common in Mexico also is the use of amulets, blessed scapulars or medals, and vials of holy water (and even garlic and onions) to ward off the "evil eye," which is thought to be particularly dangerous to children and can be given by someone who has a particularly strong stare or admires the child for too long a period.¹³ Simply counting up the number of advertisements for amulets and the like on Spanish-language television in Los Angeles will reveal that the use of such charms is still very popular among hispanics today, also in the United States.

Reminiscent also of ancient tribal ritual are the pilgrimages of penance that take place throughout Mexico, the most famous of which is the pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. Those paying a *manda* (payment for favors received)

or making a pilgrimage as penance can be seen walking on their knees for miles, carrying heavy crosses, or the like. On any day in Mexico City one can witness several such pilgrims entering the area of the national shrine with bloodied knees, near to faintness as they reach the sanctuary. The penance is offered to repay or appease, just as was done several hundred years ago at the same site by the Aztec ancestors of these pilgrims. Those who study the Bible and confess Christ as revealed in Holy Scripture see such activities as obvious perversions of the truth. We look upon God as saving us through grace, not in return for performing an act of penance. Such things are, however, the logical results of the fusion of Christianity as corrupted in Rome with the ancient paganism of Mexico.

How is it that contradictory practices can be integrated into a compatible whole in the mind of the Mexican? It must be remembered that the Roman Catholicism practiced in Mexico is primarily based on tradition and not Scripture. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, indeed, the reading of Holy Scripture was effectively discouraged. The same attitude toward Scripture is still popular in the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America today. If one takes into account as well the high rate of illiteracy in many Latin American countries, one can understand more easily how a tradition of syncretistic thinking and practice has survived down to the present day.

It is the native American side of this syncretistic tradition which is of even more significance than the Roman Catholic garments which clothe it. For the indigenous people of Mexico understandably interpreted the Christianity that was presented to them with so little explanation in terms of the pre-Columbian world-view of gods that were capricious and required continual offerings to appease them. The Christian "God of Heaven" was likewise assumed to be unpredictable by indigenous Mexicans. He was assumed to be, too, like the aboriginal creator, far removed from His creation, leaving the management of daily life to the lesser gods. Gradually the various Christian saints took on this function of the aboriginal gods.

Jesus Christ was presented to the indigenous pagans only on the cross, and so He was seen as the symbol of death. The Virgin Mary, His mother, on the other hand, was ordinarily depicted in

terms of her splendid assumption into heaven. She was considered, therefore, the grantor of benefits to man and able to intercede with the "god of the dead."¹⁴ The potency of mariolatry in Latin America resides, above all, in the conception of a defeated and dead Christ and the always accessible and giving Mother Mary. "As the mediatrix between the worshiper and Christ, or God, she becomes the giver of life, the source of health, and the means of power. It is not strange, therefore, that for many persons the center of worship in the Roman Church has shifted from Christ to Mary. People prefer to identify themselves with a living Mary rather than with a dying Christ."¹⁵

Contributing also, however, to mariolatry—in Mexico, at least—has been the emotional attachment to the mother as more central to the family than the father. The indulgent Mexican mother often intercedes for the children with the distant father, who is expected to have a stoic *macho* demeanor and divided loyalties, which are due to the prestige attached to the number of his extramarital relations (a phenomenon which has its connections with the Spanish conquest). Thus, the concepts of a distant God the Father and a benevolent Mother Mary also have a frame of reference in the traditional culture of Mexico, making such a way of religious thinking all the more acceptable.

Because of the non-scriptural basis of Roman Catholicism and its reliance instead upon a tradition which is communicated from generation to generation, an image of "Christianity" is, to be sure, strongly imbedded in the Latino psyche. Primarily, however, rather than being a religious faith, the Roman Catholic tradition in Mexico has come to be a symbol of cultural identity. Mexicans are, in fact, largely unaware of the authentic message of salvation, as enunciated in Scripture, and thus are in true need of evangelization. This need is still being largely ignored because of the erroneous view that Latin America has been "evangelized" for centuries. What the Roman Catholic tradition in Mexico has taught, however, is that any influence coming from outside the Roman Church is a threat to the "cultural essence" of Mexico. A growing number of Protestant groups, primarily Pentecostal, are appearing in Latin America; and the Roman Catholic Church is concerned about their rapid growth.

The general mood in Mexico, prior to the current administration, was recounted by Herbert Kane in *Wanted: World Christians*:

On November 9, 1984, an apostolic delegate representing the Vatican in Mexico, Jeronimi Prigione, declared that Latin American governments should take action to "counteract the activity" and "nullify the influence" of Protestant groups. About the same time, two influential newspapers in Mexico City called for the immediate expulsion of Wycliff Bible Translators, ostensibly because they were undermining Latin American culture.¹⁶

Thus, very strong prejudices are at work against those, in particular, who are ill-equipped to evangelize among hispanic people.

The Mexican Migration North: Hispanic "America"

As Mexicans have migrated to the north and have encountered different social and economic structures, they have undergone much transformation—with much apprehension. Many features, however, of the Mexican culture are jealously and zealously guarded. For the Latin American, as stated earlier, religion is largely a cultural feature, not an active faith. Ecclesiastical statistics show that the hispanic community in the United States, despite its Roman Catholic tradition, is largely unchurched; surveys indicate that less than ten percent of the hispanic community consists in "practicing Catholics." Nevertheless, in areas with a large concentration of hispanics there is often a heightened degree of identification with the local Roman Catholic church, simply because of the need to strengthen the ties to the mother country, which, for many, is represented by the mother church. Immigrants, particularly recent immigrants, attend the local parish church in much greater numbers than they ever attended in their home country. Most often they are not there to worship but to feel the embrace of their mother culture, which is typified by the Roman Church. Relatively high rates of attendance are less indicative, then, of "practicing Catholicism" than of the desire to maintain the connection in sociocultural and emotional terms with one's mother country.

It is true, too, that in areas with a large concentration of hispanics,

particularly those communities that include newer immigrants, there is a growing number of hispanics joining local Protestant community churches, particularly Pentecostal churches. It is estimated, for example, that approximately five percent of all hispanics in California are "evangelicals."¹⁷ In the San Fernando Valley there are a hundred and one community Protestant churches with hispanic ministries, ninety-five percent of which are either Pentecostal or Baptist.¹⁸

There are clearly some powerful dynamics at work that are impelling hispanics in large numbers to find church-homes outside the Roman Catholic Church—dynamics strong enough to overcome intense prejudice and a tradition of five hundred years. The "sojourn" in the United States has produced some unique feelings of alienation or, at least, isolation in the midst of an Anglo-American culture which emphasizes individuality. The immigrant is coming out of a culture which emphasizes the unity of family and community; the intense competition and individualism of the American social structure, based on wealth and personal success, tend to drive the hispanic into enclaves of his own. In those enclaves, however, the Latino people try to survive and operate according to the North American system. Even within those communities which are entirely hispanic, the old ways of interaction are breaking down and a sense of isolation is increasing; the immigrant's community here is far removed from the community which he left behind in Mexico or elsewhere in Latin America. Because in most cases the hispanic at first intends to return to his homeland, he is intent on preserving his cultural identity. Firstly, he attempts to maintain a sense of wholeness by attending the local Roman Catholic church. There he indeed finds hundreds of Latinos. But, with masses conducted every hour on the hour, everyone who attends chooses the hour that most easily fits in with his plans for the rest of the day; and there is no fixed group of parishioners who come together as a family to worship. There is no opportunity for interaction, much less for the creation of a community that could offer the individual parishioners the sense of belonging provided by the extended series of kinship-ties which he left behind in Mexico.

At the invitation of a friend he may reluctantly attend a local

store-front Pentecostal church that has thirty or fewer members. They greet him personally; they pray for his particular needs; they bring him into the fold of the "community." Even the social orientation of the "worship" is attractive to someone whose circle of relatives and friends has been severely reduced. Transplanted to an Anglo-American society that is strictly ruled by the clock, he is attracted to the casual sequence of time in the Pentecostal church where the service may last from two hours to four. Such characteristics make the local community Pentecostal church attractive to those struggling to establish an identity in a foreign land.

Like many others, then, in modern America, hispanics too are reaching out for a community of faith and service which will give them an identity in a world of alienation and fear. The Lutheran church has a wealth of biblical doctrine and liturgical tradition to offer such people treasures with which the modern sects have nothing to compare. Considerations, at the same time, of community and identity are points that will remain essential to the evangelization of hispanics in the United States in the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

In the Great Commission the church of God has received an immense responsibility from her Lord—her mission to bring the good news of God's self-sacrificing love in Jesus Christ to all people on earth (Matthew 28:19-20). It is a responsibility, more specifically, which rests not only upon denominations, but also upon all believers in Christ—gathered in local congregations around the divine word and sacraments—to be carried out in the community of the parish. For it is such believers whom Peter calls a priesthood: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). The Lord Jesus Christ has also, however, promised His church all the power necessary to realize the goal of the Great Commission: "Lo, I am with you alway, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). There is, indeed, a divine potency packed into the gospel itself which the church proclaims. Paul asserts: "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ; it is the power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1:16).

Effective communication of the gospel necessarily implies, at the same time, the removal, as much as possible, of the barriers which inhibit the hearing and understanding of the message by others. It is, to be sure, only the Holy Spirit who can break down all the obstacles which the sinful will sets in the way of saving faith. We ought to be aware, however, of the existence of more superficial barriers to evangelism—especially in cross-cultural settings—which the church can take steps to obviate.

The Lutheran church has a tremendous opportunity to reach out to the continually growing hispanic population of the United States. Some estimate that more than twenty-five million hispanics in this country are virtually untouched by the gospel.¹⁹ The hispanic community is, in any case, quite unfamiliar with the Holy Scriptures and therefore unaware of the profound truths contained therein. It has, indeed, been kept unaware of true saving grace, despite five centuries of Christianity, by a Roman Catholicism which has contented itself with a tradition of christo-paganism. The challenges to evangelization are, to be sure, significant because in much of Latin America an intense anti-Protestant prejudice has concomitantly developed which prevents the hispanic from even entering a Lutheran church. Creative approaches are necessary to break down some of the barriers of suspicion and prejudice so that the word of God may reach the heart of the hispanic and bring him to saving faith. Once an opening is achieved in a non-threatening environment, the Lutheran pastor will often find the hispanic eager to know the truth of Jesus Christ.

Endnotes

1. For a discussion of the growing hispanic workforce which will support graying Anglo-America see David E. Hayes-Bautista, et.al., *The Burden of Support: Young Latinos in an Aging Society* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1988).
2. Jose Maria di Pardo, *Tratado de "Historia Ecclesiastica": Los Siglos Primeros (I a IV)* (Buenos Aires: Escuela Biblica de Teologia, 1977), p. 53.
3. Michael Green, *Evangelization in the Early Church* (Grand

Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), p. 208.

4. Origen in *Contra Celsum* (3.55) noted how Celsus complained of the evangelization done in private homes. "It was in private houses that the wool workers and cobblers, the laundry workers and the yokels whom he so profoundly despised did their proselytizing. Even the children were taught that if they believed they would become happy and make their home happy as well." Green, *op. cit.*
5. J. Herbert Kane, *Wanted: World Christians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1986), p. 78.
6. Robert Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico: An Essay on the Apostolate and the Evangelizing Methods of the Mendicant Orders in New Spain: 1523-1572* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), p. 29.
7. Octavio Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad* (Mexico, D. F.: Fondo de Cultural Economica, 1976), p. 83.
8. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Volume II: Reformation to the Present* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 945.
9. Ricard, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
10. Xavier Campos Ponce, *La Virgen de Guadalupe y la Diosa Tonantzin* (Mexico, D. F.: Talleres Tipograficos Tonantzin, 1970), p. 27.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
12. The *limpia* is said to be the most popular treatment in Mexico; Lilian Scheffler, *Magia y Brujeria en Mexico* (Mexico, D. F.: Panorama Editorial, 1985), p. 19.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.
14. Eugene Nida, *Understanding Latin Americans: With Special Reference to Religious Values and Movements* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1974), p. 109.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
16. Kane, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

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17. In hispanic ministry there is a reluctance to be identified with the label "Protestant" because of the intense prejudices that exist in Latin America against Protestantism. The preferred term in Spanish is, therefore, *evangelicos* ("evangelicals"). It is, of course, only the Lutheran church that is truly evangelical, for it alone confesses and propounds the gospel (*evangel*) in all its truth and purity.
 18. Hispanic Association for Theological Education, *Directory of Hispanic Protestant Churches in Southern California*, 1986.
 19. Earl Parvin, *Missions USA* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), preface.