



# The Gospel People

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**Forward by  
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*The exciting story of the fast-growing  
evangelical church in Latin America*

The Gospel People  
of Latin America

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# Is Christ the answer?

“Christ is the Answer” has become a slogan for many an evangelistic campaign, a title for a Gospel tract, and an inspiration for a Christian graffiti artist. Sometimes a cynic scribbles underneath: “What is the question?”

The question is all around us in Latin America. How can countries so rich in gold, silver, oil and other resources be so poor? How can lives destroyed by alcohol and drugs be recovered? Who can bring peace in the battle between revolutionaries and oppressors?

But “Christ as the Answer” can be interpreted in a number of ways.

### *Win Them One By One*

Conversion of individuals is without question the way most Gospel People interpret Christ as-the-answer. Continuing up-beat evangelism is not just a fire-escape to heaven. Regenerate people create a climate and a force for good in society. When Juan, the neighborhood drunk, becomes a sober, steady, sincere and loving husband and parent, and a responsible worker and citizen, society is changed too in some small measure.

But the reports about Latin America’s fantastic church growth and the sight of some of the large evangelical churches may mislead us to think that not many Pedros and Mariás are left to be evangelized.

The growth of the Gospel People has been uneven. 30% of Guatemala’s population may be evangelical, but in Uruguay it may be less than 2%. Entire villages are evangelical in southern Mexico, but vast areas are unreached in the country’s heartland.

An evangelical “cathedral” and other large churches serve the poor

in Santiago, Chile, but precious little is done among the middle and upper classes. Maracaibo, Venezuela's second city, has a sizeable evangelical population but the capital, Caracas, has been expensive and forbiddingly secular for missionaries.

Arab, Chinese, Japanese and Jewish minorities have been generally untouched in Latin America. In many cities the poorest of the poor, the rich elites, the university students, the intelligentsia and the drug crowd are still unreached and they would be uncomfortable in the evangelical church that Juan attends.

### *Computer Science and Fishing Boats*

A large tent rises on the edge of Mexico City where middle-class suburbia has spread out and collides with the poor, almost rural older settlers. Inside, about 3000 people sing to the beat of electronic instruments led by a half-dozen women with tambourines.

This is the Calacoaya Cultural Center, founded by Gonzalo Vega, who, with his wife, began studying the Bible in their home, stimulated by the Catholic charismatic movement. They accepted Christ and in 1976 started a home group with 8 people which soon swelled to 70. For two years they rented a house for meetings, but opposition from neighbors forced them out. For a year they met in various locations. When the attendance reached 120 they left Catholicism and Vega quit his job in advertising to dedicate all his time to the group.

Their first building with a capacity of 500 soon proved inadequate so they erected a huge tent. About 1500 attended the first tent meeting, but that was already too small. Women were given seats while the men stood. Since then, the tent has been expanded.

But the Calacoaya Center has added another dimension to offering Christ as the answer. In addition to winning people to Christ, classes are offered to help church members and neighbors get better jobs. This is no mere basket-weaving program. These are serious courses in English, French, electricity and computer science. The monthly bulletin is a wealth of information about mechanical, medical and buy-and-sell services with updates on some 60 ministries of this group which serve not only the congregation but the surrounding community as well.

In Colombia a group of fishermen need a boat. An enterprising Colombian sees the need for public transportation into a new *barrio*

which needs bus service. AGAPE, a Colombian Christian development organization, not only loans money for these businesses but also provides to these Colombians management counsel and instruction in accounting so that the businesses can turn a profit. A Canadian missionary started AGAPE when he realized many Christians were so poor that they were hardly surviving, let alone having money to support their churches.

Money down the drain? Hardly. The combination of management training plus available capital make these people good risks. AGAPE of Colombia is part of a network of similar organizations knit together loosely by Opportunity International. The parallel organization in Costa Rica reports that 13% of the borrowers are behind in maintaining repayment schedules. But this is nothing less than phenomenal in a country where 72% of all borrowers are in arrears on loan repayments.

In many countries, the Salvation Army, World Relief, World Vision and other international agencies, including many more traditional mission organizations, are participating directly in social outreach. In the process, Latin American churches and denominations have become involved as well. It is also heartening to see Central



*Children in a Bible class for abandoned children at an evangelical orphanage in a huge metropolitan area*

American evangelicals respond significantly across national borders to relief needs caused by earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, or political upheavals and war.

But all of this is nothing more than a drop in the bucket when measured by the potential of the Gospel People or by the enormity of the need.

### *Making a Difference in the Market Place*

Downwind from an enormous foul-smelling dump just outside Mexico City, is a town which is slowly emerging from a squatters' village status. The streets are still unpaved. An unfenced canal full of factory waste runs through town, creating a hazard for children. An outreach program of social work from the local Presbyterian church is modest. What is remarkable is that this effort is part of a network of projects started by former evangelical university students, now Mexican pro-



*Foreman and engineer, both evangelicals, oversee massive public works project in Mexico City to convert 375 acres of a former dump to recreational areas.*

fessionals with better than average incomes. They took seriously their Christian responsibility for the poor and formed AMEXTRA, a home-grown Christian Mexican development organization.

Even John Wesley lamented the fact that as God helped Christians prosper, they tended to become materialistic and lose their love for God and neighbor. Among the Gospel People is a growing college-educated second generation, rising socially. Some, like those of Wesley's generation, grow cold in their Christian faith. But there are groups of Latin American Christian businessmen who encourage each other to witness in their circles. Changes in society come about when Christians take their places responsibly in government, education, communications, management and labor, and in the arts.

As they join the middle-class consumer society, many of them forget their roots — the poor *barrio* where they grew up and found Christ in the neighborhood storefront church. Some urban evangelical churches are installing carpets in the aisles and providing robes for their choir members — in the Latin context this is luxurious. If instead, more of the middle-class churches themselves were to teach a Biblical perspective about stewardship, about the danger of accumulating material possessions, about the needs of the poor, Christ would be the answer to many more people.

### *Needed: More Mordecais*

Many Gospel People shun politics. A few, however, believe that the basic system in a given country is so corrupt, so heavily weighted against most of the people, that any attempt at political reform is simply applying band-aids to a patient needing massive surgery. It should not surprise us, therefore, that Christians fought with the rebels in the Mexican revolution, or were in large force among the Sandinistas who overthrew the Somozas in Nicaragua, or participated in revolutions in the Dominican Republic, Chile, or Guatemala.

In the 1980s, when almost all of the many heavy-handed military governments gave way to more democratic regimes, the growing number of evangelicals was acquiring more voting power. The possibilities of evangelicals getting elected became real. The current president of Guatemala is an *evangélico* and evangelicals are ranking government leaders in several countries — Peru and Brazil to mention two.

The newly elected evangelical is often naive and lacks experience. Just because he is "born again" does not necessarily make him a good president, mayor, congressman or local school board member. One evangelical with political savvy in Brazil's capital considers himself a "Mordecai", giving orientation to the "Esthers" who have been elected to legislature.

Evangelical political parties? Only a few years ago such an idea would have been absurd. Colombia, the most Catholic of countries, awoke with surprise in 1990 to learn that an evangelically-oriented party won two seats in an assembly charged with rewriting the constitution. Politics can be as treacherous as a mine field for the Gospel People. But for better or worse, there are evangelically-oriented parties in Venezuela and Costa Rica.

Political issues differ from those in the U.S. Abortion is hardly an issue — most Latin Americans are shocked to learn that it is legal in the U.S. Prayer in public schools? Latin evangelicals are usually on the side of removing religion from the public schools. Schoolroom religion has been traditionally strictly Roman Catholic.

But the live issue may be the school board that delays payments of teachers' salaries in order to gain profit on interest. Meanwhile the teachers and their families suffer greatly. The evangelical middle-of-the-road Latin American Theological Fraternity is on the cutting-edge of motivating and providing theological bases for participation by Christian leaders in the political and societal arena through its conferences, seminars, and writings. In its 1983 conference in the Dominican Republic on "Christians and Political Action", for example, participants looked at issues of justice, peace and democracy in the Latin society from the standpoint of the Kingdom of God. In October of 1991 a conference in Buenos Aires focused on the role of evangelical political parties.

### *All of the Above*

How can Christ be the answer in Latin America? Seeing people "born again" through evangelism? Churches ministering compassionately to the world about them? Christians penetrating society as salt and light? Political action? It takes all of the above.

The Chilean Pentecostal may be told by his pastor to stay out of sinful politics. But as he helps his Christian brother to pay his light bill

this month he provides a micro-solution to a desperate micro-situation. The Christian professor teaching sociology at the university, on the other hand, will think in terms of macro-solutions. Both are necessary.

Of course, the real macro-solution is Christ's return to establish the visible kingdom. A perfect society on earth is not now possible nor expected. The hope of the Lord's coming spurs the Gospel People on to show forth signs of the coming kingdom in bearing witness to Jesus Christ by word, deed, and example.

"We want jobs!" This was the appeal Tony Campolo shouted during his address at an InterVarsity Urbana missions conference. Campolo, sociology professor and evangelist, was echoing the cry of the Third World poor looking for employment — not handouts or recreational facilities. At Eastern College in Pennsylvania Campolo founded a program offering an MBA designed to equip Christians to go or return to Third World countries and set up small businesses which will provide these jobs.

Christians in the U.S. can encourage and help Latin American brothers and sisters in carrying out their Kingdom work in many ways. Here are some:

- We can vote for presidents and congressmen and women who are concerned about human rights in Latin America and elsewhere.
- We can become involved in international efforts in Latin America providing relief in times of emergency and crisis, funding community development projects among the urban poor and the hordes of street children in all of the cities, and by planting trees through our gifts.
- Our churches can link up with Latin American churches working through mission organizations.
- We can participate in short-term service trips to a Latin American country or help support such programs.
- We can befriend and relate to Hispanic believers in the U.S. who are in need and who have needy families back home.
- Given the flow of many Hispanics to and from North America, every Hispanic won to Christ in the U.S. may be a missionary to family and friends abroad.

Above all, our prayers can make the difference. Prayer sustains the Gospel People as they lead their neighbors to Christ, comfort the

grieving, bless the needy, and work toward changing their society.

#### SUGGESTED FURTHER READING:

- Howard Snyder *A Kingdom Manifesto* (InterVarsity Press of Downer's Grove, IL, 1985). An exposition by a former missionary to Brazil calling for the church to be genuinely holistic in its ministry as it gets on with its kingdom work.
- Paul Borthwick *How to Be a World Class Citizen* (Victor Books of Wheaton, IL, 1991). A practical, readable book about how to become involved in mission locally and in other parts of the world, including Latin America.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# A Christ for Latin America

"The man had ninety-nine old women in his corral, but he realized that one was missing. So, he went into the desert to find her," said the new missionary. He labored through the story with his limited Spanish.

One mistake, confusing *vieja* ("old lady") with *oveja* ("sheep"), made that yet one more story to add to the repertoire of true accounts and legends of how missionaries fail — either by a mistake in language or failing to adapt to the local culture.

The mistakes of many new missionaries can be tolerated (and Latin Americans are usually very tolerant), but there are broader, more sweeping issues to be considered. What kind of picture do we paint as we describe the Lord and His ministry? How wide and far-reaching is God's plan as we describe it?

### *Which Christ?*

We mentioned earlier that according to John Mackay, the "other Spanish Christ" was left behind when the *conquistadores* came to America. The true Christ did not arrive. The Christ of the *conquistadores* was a misrepresentation, an imposter who appeared in Spanish or Portuguese wrappings. What were these visible vestments? Lust for gold, exploitation of human labor, cruel racial bigotry, and a legalistic, guilt-ridden, superstitious dead religion. The "Other Spanish Christ" was the more spiritual, the Christ of the mystics and reformers.

Nearly four hundred years later, Protestant missionaries appeared on the scene. What kind of Christ did they bring?