

In an attempt to respond to the question, “What cultural barriers exist to healthy discipleship in Latin America?” one is also forced to answer the question, “Is there anything that we can truly identify as **the** Hispanic culture?”

It should be understood that "Hispanic" does not indicate any particular race but instead refers to a group bound together by a language and *some* elements of common culture. Factors such as nationalism, regional distinctions in language, varying degrees of oppression or foreign domination and many other differences cause individuals from the Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America to have very different outlooks and values. It can be assumed that obstacles in developing disciples capable of organic, Christ-centered, multiplication will also be varied.

Further complicating any definition of Hispanic culture are factors of education and wealth. The differences between Argentina, Bolivia, Costa Rica and Nicaragua in this regard are significant and **cannot** be ignored.

Just as the Hispanic community is not monolithic in nature, neither is the Hispanic church. Evangelical Christianity in Latin America is characterized by evident strains caused by incredible diversity. Not only do Evangelical Christians reflect the diverse cultural and nationalistic characteristics of their own countries, they also reflect the denominational diversities of their adopted Protestantism. Often the Hispanic church leadership does not have the training or the experience which would equip them to learn from each other rather than competing in the race to build their respective organizations and/or disciples.

In summary, Hispanics are divided by theology, class, politics and national origin. Even language and religion can be points of difference.

Having provided this caveat regarding differences in culture in Latin America, it is important to realize that a Hispanic “supra-culture” is recognized intuitively by most Latin Americans and anthropologists. For the purposes of our discussion, we will identify the Hispanic culture as the underlying values, perspectives and cosmology of the people in any country [excluding Argentina] that was colonized by the early Spanish conquistadors.

While current data shows a marked decrease of Hispanics who identify with the Roman Catholic Church and a corresponding rapid growth among Evangelical groups, there are also large numbers of Hispanics who are abandoning organized religion altogether. In fact, fully half of the people in Mexico who ceased to identify with the traditional religion in the last five years have given up on any organized religion. In Costa Rica, Catholic statistics indicate that over 600 individuals abandon the historic, Roman church everyday. It can be assumed that many of this number do not become involved in any expression of biblical Christianity.

Because of statistics like these, the Evangelical and Charismatic churches across Latin America face even greater pressure to quickly develop effective, Christ-focused and centered discipleship strategies.

After discussing the proposed topic with several pastors, multiplying disciples and strategic leaders in Latin America, I am convinced there are six repeated factors that have become obstacles to forming Christ-centered disciples in Latin America. Three of these factors are individual in nature. Two reflect current realities in the Christian community. One of these obstacles is cross-cultural and limits the ability of the foreign missionary community to begin discipleship movements that multiply.

### **El Problema Del Cacique (The Strongman)**

Since the time of the Conquistadores, Latin America has suffered from the complex of the Cacique, or, strongman. In most countries in Latin America, the conquistadores were motivated by the system of “encomienda” imported from Spain. This medieval, feudalism encouraged the Europeans in the difficult work of conquering the New World indigenous cultures and lands by granting soldiers the privilege of exploiting the natural resources of a defined area and to impress the indigenous people into a type of serfdom. Since that inauspicious beginning, the image of the strong, virile leader has been an accepted form of government in Latin America.

This type of leadership is reflected today in the political arena by the examples of Chavez (Venezuela), Evo Morales (Bolivia) and, of course, Fidel Castro. The hopes of other countries have been dashed when their chosen leaders have not proven capable of rising to the traditional role of the strongman. Fox (Mexico) and Toledo (Peru) serve as contemporary examples. The jury is still out on leaders like Lulu in Brazil.

Unfortunately, church life in Latin America often reflects the political realities explained above. As such, Christians have the tendency to follow the latest, newest and strongest leader rather than take responsibility for their own personal growth and discipleship. It is this tendency to follow the strongman, rather than individually growing strong in faith and practice, which is ultimately very destructive in the discipleship process.

One characteristic of a disciple that is often not mentioned or discussed is the need for a disciple to show willingness to take personal responsibility to follow hard after the priorities of Christ without regard to what is popular around them. Disciples essentially believe they can influence their own destiny (and the destinies of others) while followers or believers tend to be more fatalistic and respond to exterior stimuli.

If we are going to succeed in creating a multiplication movement of youth leaders in Latin America it will be essential that we confront this difficult cultural issue. Unless individuals accept their own responsibility, rather than following the most popular leader with his current, pop version of Christianity, we will not be successful in deeply impacting next-generation leaders with Christ's values and priorities.

### **El Creísmo Fácil (The Obstacle of Easy Believism)**

The problem of creísmo fácil was first discussed in an article written by Lic. Carlos Vargas (La Paz, Bolivia) 18 years ago. In that article, Lic. Vargas identified the danger of easy Christian decisions, with little thought of biblical discipleship, as one of the greatest potential problems in Latin America. It would seem that Lic. Vargas spoke with an intelligent, if not prophetic, voice.

There is no doubt that we have seen a growth in total numbers in Latin America of individuals making decisions for Jesus Christ in the past thirty years. However, the fact that most individuals are presented with a salvation decision and not a call to discipleship has resulted in a generation of followers in Latin America.

The high percentage of followers partially explains why the strongman mentioned in the previous section is so seductive to so many Latin Christians.

Today, there is little statistical difference in Latin America between the lifestyles of Christian followers and non-Christians in regards to divorce, sexual immorality and family violence. Anecdotal evidence would indicate that Latin non-Christians seem as willing to give to charitable causes as Christians.

Until individuals are presented with a call to biblical discipleship and respond with radical changes in lifestyle, we have little hope of significantly impacting culture in Latin America. While we never want to stray from a message of grace, it is important for us to maintain authenticity by also sharing the price of following after Christ.

### **El Machismo (The Obstacle of the Insular Man)**

Related to the previous factor, we must confess that Christian culture in Latin America has done little to ameliorate the impact of machismo in the lives of most believers. The tendency to only allow one half of the Christian population a voice in the spiritual community has resulted in the loss of wisdom, sensitivity and perspective in the church as a whole during the past fifty years.

Still, the most dangerous aspect of machismo as it relates to discipleship has nothing to do with women, but with Latin men themselves. Machismo does not permit men to admit weakness or difficulty to themselves or each other. Because of this, it often becomes difficult to achieve a level of authenticity within the discipling relationship. Concepts and ideas can be discussed, but the process breaks down in the level of transparency and personal application.

Machismo has also resulted in Christian leadership being given as a prize to effective, political in-fighting as opposed to being the natural result of effective discipleship resulting in evident multiplication. Once again, the problem of the strongman is closely related.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that Jesus broke some cultural molds in His relationships with women. Machismo limits Latin men's ability to respond in a biblical fashion to how Jesus interacted with the women in His life and culture.

### **La Iglesia de los Misioneros (The Obstacle of the Mission Church Which Isn't Missional)**

The Evangelical and Charismatic church in Latin America is often presented as a success story in the North American and European, Christian press. It has appeared in media like the "transformation videos", which have been very popular in recent years. Many Anglo pastors are now reading books by Latin pastors with the hope of understanding their success of church growth.

Still, many Latin churches suffer the complex of being mission churches rather than missional churches. They are churches capable of following the example and models of the founding missions and missionaries with little experience at becoming missional themselves. Form has been successfully transferred, but the vision or capability to multiply ministries is by and large absent. It is painful to admit, but in many cases the local, Latin Church exists solely for its members.

Books like "The Purpose Driven Church" (as well as church models like the G12) are impacting this evident obstacle. However, it must be stated that many local churches still have little idea of why they exist and what their purpose or goals might be.

A great term exists in Spanish: "Hablar sin pelos en la lengua" ... speaking without hair on the tongue. It literally means to speak in a direct and forthright fashion.

As a missionary with over 27 years of experience in Latin America, allow me to comment "sin pelos en la lengua" about the dead-end model of church that organizations have planted for years in Latin America. Missions have sent

workers who have begun ministries supported with funds from the exterior which have been propped up by an infrastructure also provided generously from the outside. While many of these churches give every appearance of health, they are incapable of multiplying their current model in additional church plants.

Leaders and churches with little experience in multiplying themselves will have little ability in producing disciples with a passion for multiplying themselves. It is imperative that Latino churches begin to break the mold and begin to think and act in a missional fashion. It is imperative that missions and missionaries allow them the right and honor to create churches which are essentially Latin.

### **Una Iglesia Mal Preparada Para Los Cambios Culturales Que Enfrenta (The Obstacle of an Ill-Prepared Church Facing Cultural Changes)**

Culture goes through periods of evolution and revolution. The church in Latin America is currently confronting revolution related to rapid and almost constant cultural change. Unfortunately, the church seems unprepared for this seismic cultural shift. Without preparation and thought, it is very probable the current church leaders will fail in reaching an entire generation with the message of authentic discipleship.

Authors Carl R. Smith and Robert W. Lynn wrote, "Some day, we hope, study will be as much a part of churchmanship as worship and financial support are today. To be sure, the church of Jesus Christ must be more than just a studying church. But it cannot be less than a studying church and still be faithful to its Lord."

Now, is such a time for study... and application.

Post-modernity is a reality in most of the urban centers in Latin America. While some leaders will argue about definitions of that term, one is forced to realize that the Latin version of post-modernity is vital and effecting change in most of South and Central America. Unless the church is willing to engage with this seismic cultural shift it will find itself irrelevant and incapable of communicating effectively with next generation leaders.

### **Misioneros Mal Equipados para Comunicar En La Cultura (The Obstacle of Missionaries with Little Depth in Cultural Understanding)**

It is hard for any missionary to admit the following, but current realities do not permit the luxury of denial.

Many missionaries from Anglo and Northern European countries find themselves attracted to Latin America, or, at the very least, their limited perception of Latin cultures. There is something about Latin America that many English-speaking people find attractive and even welcoming. Because of that, it is natural for them to find a connection and feel led or directed to ministry in such an environment.

Because Latin America has such a high concentration of youth, the above is especially true of people interested in student ministry.

Unfortunately, it is true that Latin cultures are, by and large, very welcoming. This is unfortunate because foreigners are often welcomed on their own terms rather than being forced to make the necessary cultural transitions which would allow them to minister on a heart level. As long as missionaries minister with limited cultural literacy, they will not be able to form the in-depth relationships which will permit them to build into deeper, discipling relationships.

Cultural anthropologists use two words to describe the learning process when applied to cross-cultural living: rising and sinking. Rising into a culture implies the formal acquisition of knowledge through books, video, seminars and discussion. Everyone going into a new culture must engage in some level of rising into that culture. Sinking into culture only occurs when enough confidence is developed between the missionary and nationals that uninhibited social interaction can take place and a wide variety of topics can be discussed with little or no restraint. Cultural fluency requires a missionary to adapt through *rising* into the host culture until he is invited by the nationals to *sink* into their world.

Each culture has habits and values that have been deeply internalized by the members of that culture. We must think through the underlying habits that we take for granted to determine how they fit into our morals and culture and, especially, how they fit into Christ's model of discipleship. It is essential that missionaries, especially missionaries to student leaders, once again take seriously their responsibility to develop the cultural literacy and tools which will allow them to begin multiplying movements.

### **Reasons for Hope**

Although the purpose of this short paper has been to provoke discussion about possible obstacles to discipleship in Latin America, there are also a number of characteristics in Latin culture which are positive for the development of Christ-centered disciples. Latinos' willingness to place priority on social relationships allows them to incorporate intuitively some of the biblical values we must struggle to develop in North Americans. Latinos' willingness to commit to a cause once they have embraced it should also be mentioned. Even the myth of the strong, Latin family can be useful as a building block to developing biblical values.

Finally, although the obstacles presented here are serious, it is a hopeful sign when they receive a forum by a group such as GYI. Before we can provide answers, the questions must be understood. Before we can find practical solutions, the obstacles that currently exist must be identified and explored. May the Lord give us grace to do just that.