

S. L. ...

Our Man in Latin America

Several years ago you may have seen the movie, "Our Man in Havana," one of the earlier spoofs of secret service activities in a foreign country, in this case pre-Castro Cuba. Or you may have enjoyed more recently the even more incredible, straight-faced, T.V. spy series called "Mission Impossible," which for sheer, amoral, dramatic entertainment is hard to beat. (I call it my favorite missionary program.) In both cases you get a picture, fantastically distorted though it may be, of a small group of dedicated, disciplined individuals who are sent out to do a particular job which may have tremendous local, national, and international implications.

~~Gloria and I~~ ^{Your fraternal workers} are, in a very real sense, your agents in Guatemala. Let me assure you, however, that our methods are somewhat different and our work is completely disassociated from that of the C.I.A. or of any other government agency. But there is a sense of drama and dedication and discipline among your missionaries and fellow Christians as they try to face the massive challenge of Latin America today.

In order to share with you this experience I want to ask each of you to put yourself in the same position, as "Our Man in Latin America." And then I will ask you, What would you do? Your resources are very limited; the problems of human need are enormous; the whole situation is explosive; you must think in terms of specific priorities. How would you, as "Our Man in Latin America," define the mission of the church there.

Before we pursue this line of thought, let me clarify our purpose. Probably no one here has any thought of becoming a missionary to Latin America, and I am not recruiting for COEMAR. There are very few openings in any case. But if you are a member of the Christian Church and a follower of Jesus Christ in today's world you are impelled to be a missionary. You are sent out into the field of human need, the missionfield, if you care to call it that. And you must define for yourself and with your families and in this local church what is the mission of the church as it confronts your world.

Project yourself now for a few minutes into the Latin American scene, where conditions are more extreme and crises are more frequent and more explosive, as a challenge to your understanding of the church's mission. What if you were "Our Man in Latin America?" But then bring yourself right back to Mercer Island and Seattle and ask yourself what you are doing here. You are "Our Man in the U.S.A."

I. Evangelism

If you are at all traditional, you will probably begin your mission in Latin America by preaching the Gospel. You reason that all men need more than anything else to be brought into fellowship with God -- to know his will and his love, to

find forgiveness of sin and meaning for life, to know Christ and become his followers. Your biblical basis is the Great Commission, which Christ gave to his disciples at the end of his time on earth: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (Matt. 28:19) Or, as the old familiar King James Version of Mark has it, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." (Mark 16:15)

Let's see how this concept of mission is being carried forward at this very hour on Sunday morning throughout Latin America. We are driving down the Pan-American Highway parallel to the Pacific Coast in Guatemala. Periodically we pass gravel and dirt roads which turn off and lead down into the hot, coastal plain where large tracts of land have been parceled out as homesteads and the tropical foliage has been cleared all within the last 25 years. We may or may not see signs for La Blanca, Pueblo Nuevo, Caballo Blanco, La Maquina, Tiquisate, and Santa Ana Mixtan.

We take the road to La Maquina. It is not difficult driving because we are still at the beginning of the rainy season. After an hour and a half we pull off the road in front of a neat, tin-roofed chapel, which has been erected by the local congregation on a portion of the Morales homestead. The day's activities begin with Sunday School -- a class for children, another for the youth, and one for the adults, one class in the chapel and the others out under the trees. Then there is a worship service. After the service the families take the long walk back to their homes, carrying their Bibles and hymnbooks (and their babies). Late in the afternoon they start back toward the church, stopping along the way to talk with friends, share their faith, and invite everyone to the evening evangelistic service.

These Guatemalans work hard during the week on their land, most of them without any mechanized equipment, but they are independent and produce enough to subsist on and have a chance to improve themselves. They are committed to Jesus Christ, and they believe that the mission of the church is to preach the gospel to those who don't know him. They carry out this mission through the church, which they support entirely themselves, and through their own personal testimony. They cannot afford to hire a pastor, so they themselves do the work of the ministry -- the teaching, preaching, visiting, etc. And they take every opportunity to extend the witness of the church into new areas -- by holding special services in their homes and at the church, winning new converts, starting new preaching points, and building new chapels. They only have about fifty communicant members, but when they set up a series of evangelistic meetings with a well-known speaker and lots of special music they get 1500 people to come.

If you were "Our Man in Latin America," you would want to identify yourself with these people who are carrying out the evangelistic mission of the church in thousands of villages, towns, and cities in that part of the world. Your own faith would be challenged, you would have plenty of work to do, and you would be amazed at the astonishing growth of this movement, which parallels the evangelical awakenings in this country in the 18th Century and the rapid spread of our churches in the 19th Century as the frontier was extended westward.

II. Health, Education, and Welfare

The first stage of your mission in Latin America is evangelism. It is a basic function of the church. But you will probably soon find yourself involved in another dimension of mission which we may call "Health, Education, and Welfare."

As you get to know the people, you can't help but notice and become concerned about their problems and their needs. In Guatemala, for example, there is widespread malnutrition, which is the basic cause of the terribly high infant mortality rate--30% of all babies die before they reach maturity. Sanitary conditions are poor and medical services very limited. Nine out of ten people have parasites. Illiteracy is very high; some 60% of the population cannot read and write; and the percentage of illiterates is growing. Educational programs are inadequate. Less than 1% of the people have any university training. Half of the children are illegitimate. Salaries and working conditions and employment opportunities are extremely poor. The average per capita income is less than \$200 per year. You can't live and work in this kind of situation, especially if you are a messenger of God's love, without doing something to alleviate the pain and sorrow of the people around you.

The biblical basis for this stage of your mission may be the example of Jesus, who during his ministry not only preached the gospel but also healed the sick, exorcized those who were possessed, taught the poor, and gave himself to all men. Or you may prefer Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats, in which he taught that the Kingdom of God is prepared for those who give food to the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, and visit the sick and imprisoned. He even said, "Truly, I say to you, as you do it to one of the least of these my brethren, you do it to me." (Matt. 25:40)

There are, of course, many different kinds of health, education, and welfare programs going on in Latin America. There are hundreds of church, government, and private agencies and institutions. In a thousand different ways they endeavor to help people. You, too, will want to get involved.

Try education, which is widely espoused as the key to progress among underdeveloped peoples. Certainly it is a vital factor in breaking the cycle of poverty, malnutrition, ignorance, and unemployment. Perhaps you can do something in this area.

You see that there are too few schools, but you don't have resources to build new ones and to pay teachers' salaries. You see, too, that many children do not progress at school and many others are discouraged even from attending because of the attitudes of their parents. And you realize that virtually nothing is being done for the adults.

After some investigation you discover that your limited resources can make a significant contribution toward the education of adults. Mature men and women need not attend classes long hours every day like small children. The government

offers the 6th Grade Certificate for anyone who can pass the examinations, and this Certificate is an important sign of social status and a door to better employment. Programmed textbooks can be prepared to lead an adult in his studies at home and enable him to pass these Sixth Grade examinations, and publishing costs can be recovered from the sale of the books. Tutorial help can also be arranged on a self-paying, parttime basis. Apparently, unlimited numbers of men and women, and with their children, would therefore be able to attain the means of self-education and achieve the benefits that come with it.

Perhaps this is where you, as "Our Man in Latin America," would want to invest your time and resources. Perhaps this is how you would interpret the mission of the church in Mexico, Panama, Ecuador, and Bolivia.

III. Social Change

The third stage in your analysis of the church's mission in Latin America has to do with social change. We suggested already that you can't preach the gospel to people without taking seriously their particular needs. Similarly, you cannot try to help people meet their needs without coming up against the larger forces which cause and perpetuate these conditions. There are inadequacies and injustices in the social, economic, and political system which keep people down, which any amount of health, education, and welfare programs cannot change. If you intend to take seriously the plight of these people, you must therefore consider these structures and the possibilities for basic social change.

Here, too, there are biblical grounds for mission. You remember that when Jesus preached at the synogogue in Nazareth he chose as his text the passage from Isaiah which goes like this: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has annointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." (Lk 4:18-19)

Think in terms of the workers on a coffee plantation in Guatemala. Along the same highway we mentioned earlier you pass through some of the richest coffee-producing land in the world. It lies generally between 1500' and 3000' elevation. where the rainfall is high and the heat not so intense. You enter one of these plantations--or fincas as they are called in Spanish--by driving up a long private road which is lined with a colonnade of majestic palm trees. You pass acres of well-tailored coffee bushes, growing in the shade of beautiful hard-wood trees. Then you come to the heart of the finca, an open area dominated by a large, luxurious manor house, which is kept for the owner (who may or may not live there), a large cement patio, where the coffee is dried, and several buildings used for the administration of the plantation and the processing of the coffee. There may also be a pond with ducks and other birds, citrus, banana, and more exotic fruit trees, and a display of tropical flowers and shrubs. Beyond this area or further down the drive you come across the workers' housing--simple, tiny, one-room, dirt-floored shacks which offer none of the conviences and few of the essentials of a home. There are also several larger sheds, which are used for the seasonal workers and their families, who are brought in by the truckload for the three or four months of harvesting. Salaries generally run about 50 cents a day, except when there is a drop in the coffee market (no work) and during harvest (pay by quota).

7P What should you do for these people? Preach the gospel? Yes, certainly. Bring in some medical services, teach them about sanitation and nutrition, offer literacy and primary education classes? Yes, indeed, if you can. But you will also want to go on and see if there is some way in which their whole way of life can be changed--so that they might not find themselves in such a vulnerable position, so that they might have the means to produce and earn sufficiently, so that they might participate freely and fully in the life of their society.

As soon as you raise this question you find yourself floundering in a stormy sea where the winds of debate blow at hurricane force, threatening to destroy not only those who hold and seek the helm but also the helpless passengers. The key word is, of course, revolution--but what it means and how it is to be achieved very few can say with intelligence and objectivity. To many Latin Americans today it is not a matter of choice between revolution and the status quo but when will the revolution break out. It is not a matter of violence vs non-violence; the existing structures refuse to be changed peaceably, and violence is inherent in the present social order.

It is interesting to note that our church has tried to enter into this debate and speak to this enormous problem of social change at the recent meeting of the General Assembly in San Antonio, Texas. The commissioners adopted a paper entitled "Illusion and Reality in Inter-American Affairs." This paper reports that United States presence in Latin America has not, even when directed through programs with the best intentions, served to help the poor and the oppressed so much as it has served to support the established oligarchies and the forces of oppression. It exhorts the United States to restrain and redirect its influence in Latin America--cultural, political, military, economic, and ecclesiastic--so as to give more support to the forces of change. Since the United States is such a major force, the church may exert some small influence in terms of the major issues of life in Latin America today, even in terms of the worker on a coffee plantation in Guatemala.

And you, as "Our Man in Latin America," might find that one of the important dimensions of your work is to study these issues and interpret them to your related churches in the United States. At least you would want to confront the church there and here with the urgent challenge of social change.

IV. The Church

Let me suggest a fourth and final aspect of mission, the church itself. After struggling with some of the larger issues of social change in Latin America, where your influence is probably next to nil and the risks in human life are probably very great, you come back to the church to see what is unique about it and to see what is its potential. The people of Latin America have, as we have noted, great physical, social and educational needs, but there are other, deeper dimensions of human existence. Even the most favored in every society are lost and unhappy. The economic and political structures of Latin America must be changed, but every system needs the right kind of people to run it and to live in it and make it human and humane. Whatever else that people

need, they need love and acceptance. They need to love. They need to be helped, and they need to serve. They need to be reconciled to God and to their fellow men. The church, after all, has untold spiritual and moral resources; the Gospel can change men and society; Jesus Christ is the Lord of history.

A good part of the New Testament is dedicated to the building up of the church, which is called the body of Christ. In several places Paul describes this body. He says that all of the members have gifts, different kinds of gifts, and that these are to be shared in the preparation of all the members for ministry, i.e. service, and that this ministry is to build up the body of Christ so that we all may become mature men and reach the stature of Christ. He points out that this happens when all the different parts fit together and work properly building up the body in love. (Ephesians 4:11-13) This concept, too, must be a part of your understanding of the church's mission.

Consider the potential of the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America. It has held a dominant place in the life of these countries ever since the Conquest of the New World in the 16th Century. In almost every village, town, and city in Latin America you will find a central plaza with government offices on one side and the Catholic Church or cathedral on another side. Until recently 90% of the people considered themselves catholic. To be sure this generally has been a very superficial, nominal, and at times degenerate form of Christianity, but the possibilities for mission are there. And since the Second Vatican Council there have been signs of new life in the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America. They are sending in thousands of new missionaries. The vernacular is now used in worship, the Bible is being circulated, the Gospel is being presented to the people in greater clarity than ever before. Last year the council of bishops of Latin America met in Medellin, Colombia and issued radical declarations on the major social problems, which seems to indicate that the Church will give up its privileged position in relation to the established oligarchies in order to identify itself with the oppressed masses. As you look at these developments, you ask yourself what might be the effect of a New Reformation in this part of the world.

And look at the protestant movement in Latin America today. To get an immediate impression of the vitality of this movement take a flight to Sao Paulo, the fastest growing city in the world. As you come in over the city you are amazed at its architectural beauty, which is said to surpass New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles combined. You go downtown to a subterranean garage where a young pentecostal pastor leads a large congregation. Overhead is being erected a church auditorium which will seat 25,000 people--the largest in the world. (And I have no doubt but that they will fill it.) This church has become a symbol of the rapid growth of the indigenous pentecostal churches all over Latin America. Within just nineteen years, if present growth rates continue, Brazil will be 50% protestant. Santiago, the capital of Chile is already 30% protestant. Recent statistics show that the protestants of Latin America, who until recently were only a tiny minority, are now growing at $3\frac{1}{2}$ times the rate of the general population, which in turn is growing at twice the world rate. Who can measure the potential of this movement--in terms of evangelistic zeal and emotional commitment, in terms of changed lives, in terms of human need and social change?

As "Our Man in Latin America" you would have to consider with utmost seriousness the role of the church, not just your own but especially the Roman Church on the one hand and the Pentecostals on the other. And you would want to use your gifts for the building up of the body of Christ. You would want to work toward the unity and the maturity of all the members in this ministry, which seems to be so promising not only for the church but through the church to the world around it.

V. Conclusion

"Our Man in Latin America." I have asked you to put yourself in this position, which is the position in which I find myself. I have asked you what would you do if you were a missionary in that part of the world. I have asked you to face vicariously the massive challenge of Latin America today and try to define the mission of the church there. The needs are enormous; the situation is explosive; the church is there and must respond.

But you are not "Our Man in Latin America." You are "Our Man in the U.S.A." So I must ask you, Do you take seriously your missionary vocation here? Have you defined carefully what is the mission of the church in this part of the world? Are you investing your life -- not just your religious life -- in terms of the urgent priorities of the world's needs right here where you live?

Surely recent events in this country have convinced us all that the missionfield, the field of human need, is Atlanta as well as Asuncion, Berkley as well as Buenos Aires, Chicago as well as Caracas. And the questions we have asked about the church in Latin America are the very same questions that we must ask in the U.S.A. 1. Do people need to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ? In contrast to Latin America where the evangelistic witness of the church is so strong, the churches here are losing ground rapidly. Some have commented that the church is now becoming disestablished in this country. 2. Are there widespread needs in this affluent country? We have all heard that thirty million Americans go to bed hungry every night. 3. Is there need for basic social change? The racial and student crises of the past six years have called into question our whole way of life; they have brought to the fore a discussion of revolution; they have threatened to pull down the established structures of our society. 4. Is the church in a position where it can do anything in this country? Just look around you at the people who belong to this congregation; consider all of the churches in this metropolitan area; and then think of several hundred thousand congregations of different denominations across the country. Never has the church had such material resources and such capable members, resources which should be at the disposal of the spiritual and moral forces of our faith, resources which might be released in mission to the people of our world.

Inevitably someone asks, What can we do? It is time for each of us to start to struggle seriously with the problems of our world and to define for himself his mission. The issues are so complex and overwhelming that we need the different gifts of all the members in order to understand and carry out our mission. And as we commit ourselves in mission at many different levels in a thousand different ways, each of us will have only a tiny part to play. We may feel guilty of our failures in the past and helpless in the face of today's problems, but we cannot afford to quit.

Several years ago one of my professors, who, it happens, had spent many years in Latin America, pointed out that the sad thing is not that so many Christians do so little about our world but that so few stay awake at night crying out for answers to the needs of their fellow men.

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