

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 9

Volume 9 • Number 3 • July 1985

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership, interpreting the Christian faith for
contemporary living.*

GENERAL EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



Published by
THE PATERNOSTER PRESS

North American Protestant Theology: Impact on Central America

James C. Dekker

Reprinted from Occasional Essays (Latin American Evangelical Center for Pastoral Studies), December 1984 with permission.

This well researched article shows how fragmented Protestant churches have often become prey to the manipulation of political powers in Latin America in spite of their profession of the separation of Church and State. The author discusses the extent to which the avowed theologies of North American missions have become the theologies of Latin Americans. He appeals for a conscientious biblical political education to help evangelicals dissolve their blind spots.

(Editor)

Probably not even Carl F. H. Henry can define 'North American Protestant Theology,' much less articulate its impact on another culture. We are forced to make inferences drawn from sources that deal with other themes. In researching this topic I asked Dr. Wilton Nelson, Professor Emeritus of Church History at the Latin American Biblical Seminary in San José, Costa Rica, for bibliographical suggestions. Nelson wrote back:

... it seems a bit strange if you are referring to Protestant theology in Central America, since theology in this part of the world has been formed almost entirely by American missionaries.... It can hardly be said that there was a *criolla* theology affected by theology from the USA.¹

So in a sense we have our answer early. The impact of North American protestant theologies is total.²

That helps us little. Still it does suggest questions this paper will treat: Against what background did Protestant missions come to Central America? Who came? What theologies have they taught?

The bibliography to investigate the question I posed to Wilton Nelson is almost nonexistent. Orlando Costas' pioneering *Theology of p. 227 the Crossroads*³ treats all Latin America and is not primarily an historical study. Nelson himself has written a brief, informative book, *El Protestantismo en Centro America*.⁴ Clifton Holland is finishing a doctoral dissertation on 'The History of the Protestant Movement in Central America.' None deals extensively, however, with the impact of the theologies in Central America.

Sources that could help answer our questions exist, but in out-of-the-way places: small mission archives; promotional literature of various missions; journals of deceased

¹ Letter, Nelson to author, August 19, 1983.

² Of course we cannot ignore the important work that Latin American theologians are doing currently. The Latin American Theological Fraternity (LATF), for example, provides a focus for creative theological and biblical work. The LATF is a recent development, however. Its concerns often focus on many of the problems of Latin American Protestantism to be discussed here.

³ *Theology of the Crossroads: Missiology in Mainline Protestantism, 1969-1974* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1976).

⁴ (Miami: Editorial Caribe, 1982; Eng. Trans. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

missionaries that appeared in mimeographed form, if at all. Research and travel costs preclude access to such information. Without these tools, we are left with second best. Immediately we see the need for scholarship in this area. Based on the preliminary research I have done, I offer tentative responses to the three questions I posed.

AGAINST WHAT HISTORICAL BACKGROUND DID PROTESTANT MISSIONS COME TO CENTRAL AMERICA?

J. Lloyd Meacham's classic *Church and State in Latin America*⁵ sketches the situation that formed the backdrop for Protestant missions entering Central America. Of Latin America in general Meacham writes:

The bitter, devastating, politico-ecclesiastic conflicts were the result ... of attempts to enforce unwise policies, pro- and anti-clerical. The extremists among the clericals and anti-religionists alternated in control of the governments and ... insisted on forcing their remedies down the throats of their adversaries. There was no compromise on religious policy. The inevitable result was revolution and counterrevolution, repressive measures and retaliatory measures.⁶

Independence from Spain gave birth to the fledgling Central American Federation in 1821. In the area, political and ecclesiastical affairs were so thoroughly intertwined as to be at times indistinguishable. Thus the break from Spain would long rumble like earthquake aftershocks through the ecclesiastical landscape. Why was this so? To answer that, we will briefly look at the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) in the colonial era. [p. 228](#)

It is now a cliché that the RCC was the handmaiden of the Portuguese and Spanish states during colonization. Several popes ceded to Portuguese and Spanish monarchs the right of naming all church officials and collecting tithes. James E. Wood, Jr., refers to the 'almost total absorption of the Roman Catholic Church by the crown.' Throughout colonization, then,

perhaps inevitably the Church became increasingly identified with the power and prestige of Spanish rule.... As a Spanish church, rather than an indigenous church, the *sympathies of the hierarchy* [italics mine] were clearly with Spain and not with the emerging new nations.⁷

Wood's generalizations hold true for Central America also.

The hierarchy sided with Spain while independence was brewing in the New World. Nelson points to the division between higher and lower clergy. He recalls that thirteen of the twenty-nine signatories to the Central American Declaration of Independence were priests.⁸ Wood agrees. Taken as a whole, the clergy

was bitterly divided in their sympathies and support. To be sure, the sympathies of the hierarchy and the higher clergy—almost all of whom were Spanish born—were on the side of the crown, but the sympathies of the lower clergy—the vast majority of whom were native Americans of Indian and Negro parentage—were on the side of political

⁵ *Church and State in Latin America: A History of Politico-Ecclesiastical Relations* (rev. ed.; Chapel Hill, N.C.: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1966).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 308.

⁷ James E. Wood, Jr., 'Editorial,' *A Journal of Church and State*, Spring, 1966, pp. 174, 178–79.

⁸ Nelson, 27.

independence from Spain. Members of the lower clergy even actively participated in the independence movement.⁹

We begin to see the complex background that Protestantism was soon to enter. As a political entity, the RCC had left a mark identical to that of imperialist Spain. Thus *institutionally* it became the whipping boy of Latin America's patriots. To support the hierarchy's policies was to favor Spain and oppose independence. This is not, however, the whole story. Through want of alternatives, the RCC had become thoroughly ingrained into Latin American life as a *religious* force. The clergy who supported independence did not turn anti-Catholic. They remained faithful to Catholic teachings, as did most of the political patriots of Latin America. With independence, a dynamic political and religious situation was brewing, but anticlericalism by no means brought anti-Catholicism.

Anticlericalism continued influential after Central American independence. p. 229 Wood points out that after independence the RCC still reaped what it long had sown. Attempting now to break the political back of the RCC, 'the new state rulers maintained that they had inherited the right of patronage with sovereignty.'¹⁰ Papal protests that patronage was a privilege and not a right were in vain. '*Patronato nacional* was substituted for royal patronage throughout most of Latin America.'¹¹

As an institution the RCC was down but not out. For several decades the pendulum swung between the liberal anticlericals and the hierarchy allied with pro-Vatican *criollo* patriots. Even during this restive period Roman Catholicism remained the only authorized religion.¹² The RCC regained lost ground in Guatemala during General Rafael Carrera's dictatorship from 1839 to 1865. After some laws enacted during Mariano Galvez' ineffectual rule were repealed, Catholicism was reinstituted as the sole religion of the country in 1852.¹³ When Miguel García Granados toppled Vicente Cerna in 1870, however, the RCC suffered a blow from which it has institutionally never recovered. In June 1873 freedom of religion was decreed; the concordat of 1852 became invalid.¹⁴

In Costa Rica the RCC was faring better than in Guatemala. Until 1848 expulsion was guaranteed any foreigner who propagated any faith other than Catholicism. In 1869 other 'sects' were officially tolerated. But the RCC was still the state religion and received some subsidy.¹⁵ The examples of Guatemala and Costa Rica show that, slowly, religious toleration was both legislated and actual. Into this abidingly restive situation came the first Protestants. Most were immigrants; some daring few came later as missionaries.

WHO WERE THE FIRST PROTESTANTS?

Wilton Nelson gives a curious introduction to Protestantism in Central America. Instead of starting in the nineteenth century, he goes back to the English pirates who gutted Spanish imperial shipping. While these men were often rogues, they were nevertheless

⁹ Wood, 26–27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Mecham, 310, 311; see Nelson, 26–32, for some changes occurring in Central America.

¹³ Mecham, 316.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Richard L. Millett, 'Protestant-Catholic Relations in Costa Rica,' *A Journal of Church and State*, XII (Winter 1970), 41–42.

both English and P. 230 Protestant. Nelson quotes Anglican priest Stephen Caiger and comments:

'The pirates considered their plunder of the Spanish galleons a *holy war* [italics mine] against Spanish greed and the cruelty of the Inquisition.' Every ship carried a Bible on which the pirates would place their hands to swear faithfulness to the 'brotherhood.'¹⁶

If the pirates were fighting a 'holy war,' the RCC was defending its turf with surpassing vigor. It established the Inquisition in the New World, whose zeal Nelson explains:

The motive for establishing the Inquisition was precisely the RCC's fear that Protestantism would make inroads into the Americas. As Guatemalan expert Ernesto Cinchilla Aguilar says: 'Persecution of Protestants constitutes one of the fundamental attitudes of the Holy See in the Americas.'¹⁷

Early on, the stage was set for mutually hostile attitudes and actions that soon characterized Protestantism's battle with Catholicism in the Americas.

No one claims that the English pirates' oaths fulfilled the Great Commission in any way. Even the first Protestants came to Central America as immigrants and not as missionaries.¹⁸ Again, conservative Costa Rica held off longer than the other areas. According to Millett:

Until the last decade of the nineteenth century, Protestantism in Costa Rica was generally confined to non-Catholic immigrants, notably English Anglicans in San José and Jamaican Baptists and Methodists in the coastal area around Limón.¹⁹

From the outset, however, a political motive helped encourage the spread of Anglicanism. The Episcopalian church located today in downtown San José, Costa Rica, was one of many founded in concert with an outspoken British foreign policy goal. Nelson writes:

At that time [1860] the British Empire was rapidly developing its reach and surely the government of her Majesty [Queen Victoria] sponsored the construction of similar chapels as a part of its expansionist policy.²⁰

While cross and sword were impossible to separate in the Spanish Empire, cross and trowel looked pretty much alike to imperial Britain.

Guatemala's and the other countries' introduction to Protestantism p. 231 came earlier through Protestantism's real vanguard throughout Latin America, namely the Bible societies. Their history is told elsewhere.²¹ These were the first organizations to approach Latin America with the evangelistic fervor that has since characterized Protestantism.²²

By nature nondenominational, the Bible societies did an indispensable service for the spread of the Gospel. Their courageous colporteurs in many cases placed Bibles in the

¹⁶ Nelson, 16, author's translation.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 18–19, author's translation.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 27–29.

¹⁹ Millett, 41.

²⁰ Nelson, 33, author's translation.

²¹ Henry Otis Dwight, *The Centennial History of the American Bible Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1916). This is dated, but it includes good sources.

²² Nelson, 45.

hands of national priests who had never seen the book before. One representative, D. H. Wheeler, worked in Nicaragua. When he refused to fight against William Walker's ruffians, he was executed.²³

More than one worker took Bible distribution a step further and helped organize educational systems. In Guatemala the former dissolute British sailor Frederick Crowe came to the Lord and quickly turned his energies to spreading his newfound message of salvation. From 1846 to 1849, during the term of pro-Vatican Rafael Carrera, Crowe faced much opposition. Still he ran a school which the eventual statesman and poet Lorenzo Montúfar attended.²⁴ Crowe suffered for his faithfulness. He was booted from Guatemala when the archbishop accused him of distributing illegal literature—and of being an Anglican priest, though he was a Baptist layman.

Meanwhile, Guatemala's political ferment led to one crisis after another. The Liberal Revolution of 1871 placed Miguel García Granados in the Presidency. His comrade-in-arms, Justo Rufino Barrios, took his place in 1873. As happened during the convulsive decade of independence, so now Guatemala's Liberals were anticlerical but not necessarily anti-Catholic. In hewing partially to the ideas of the French Revolution and Comtian Positivism,²⁵ Barrios saw the RCC's continuing political power and Carrera's Catholic reestablishment as a major barrier. He wished to free Guatemala from its isolation within the Iberian world. The new constitution's religious toleration permitted the government to move against the RCC once again and pave the way for official Protestant entrance.

Such was the situation that the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missionaries faced when it placed the first Protestant missionary in [p. 232](#) Guatemala. Mrs. Cleaves, a Presbyterian, owned a ranch in Chimaltenango. She convinced her friend Barrios that he could start a new era by introducing Presbyterianism. Barrios instructed Lorenzo Montúfar, then in the United States, to make the necessary arrangements.²⁶ Barrios travelled to the United States and returned with John C. Hill, the Presbyterian missionary whose passage the Guatemalan government paid.²⁷ Barrios charged Hill nominal rent for the house that served as the school where he also sent his children for a time.²⁸ Troubled by financial problems, Hill left Guatemala in 1885 after Barrios died in battle.

Other desultory attempts to send missionaries to Guatemala continued for a few years.²⁹ The Presbyterians soon replaced Hill. Edward Haymaker arrived in Guatemala in 1887 and stayed there, with only one prolonged absence, even after his retirement. Throughout his nearly sixty-year career, Haymaker founded schools and churches all over the country. They developed into the National Evangelical Presbyterian Church of

²³ *Ibid.*, 48; Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, V (New York and London: Harper, 1943), 115–16.

²⁴ Nelson, 46–47.

²⁵ Hubert J. Miller, 'Positivism and Educational Reforms in Guatemala, 1871–1885,' *A Journal of Church and State*, VIII (Spring 1966), 251ff.

²⁶ Nelson, 49–50.

²⁷ Latourette, 115–16.

²⁸ Nelson, 50.

²⁹ Wilkins B. Winn, 'Albert Edward Bishop and the Establishment of the Central American Mission in Guatemala, 1899–1922,' *Militarists, Merchants and Missionaries* (University, Alabama: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1970), 93.

Guatemala. Today the church numbers some 16,000 communicant members in nine presbyteries and four distinct cultural groups.

We detailed the beginnings and current results of Presbyterian missions in Guatemala because they are representative of the mainline denominational work that was carried on in Central America. Briefly, Methodist, Baptist (especially Southern) and Presbyterians were the *denominations* that led the way in Central America. All these groups organized churches with close ties to the parent organizations, largely from the United States.³⁰ Thus despite the transplant of North American denominationalism, none of those groups viewed itself as the *only* representative of the true Gospel. Rather, they were united—sometimes loosely, sometimes closely—in common effort to bring ecclesiastical Protestantism to Central America.

But denominational missions were not the only groups representing Protestantism. We have mentioned the Bible societies. Akin to them in their general lack of ecclesiology are the faith missions that Latourette p. 233 says prevailed more in Latin America than in other places.³¹ We will not list all such missions, but they share characteristics. They are not associated with just one denominational agency; the missionaries they sponsor must raise their own support. Examples of these are the Latin America Mission (LAM) and the United World Mission (UWM)—to pick two arbitrarily. LAM has organized extensive ministries through much of Latin America. In the early 1970s it became an equal partner with many ministries that had been the mission's children or grandchildren.

UWM carries on ministries in Guatemala, Cuba and Venezuela most notably. Both LAM and UWM, while not denominational agencies in the United States, organized denominations overseas. Ecclesiology was not the strong suit of faith missions in their inception. Still, once on the field, missionaries saw the need for ecclesiastical organization.

The well-known independent Central American Mission (CAM) also formed a denomination through the isthmus. The CAM was established in Dallas, Texas, in 1890. Its primary aim 'was the spread of Bible teachings throughout Middle America.'³² Organized by Dr. C. I. Scofield, the CAM's zeal stems in part from its dispensationalist teaching that these are the last hours of the last days. Now more than ever before, Christ's second coming is imminent. Such urgency placed thirty-three missionaries in all five Central American countries by 1902.³³

The flood of Protestant missionaries, mostly from the United States, has not abated. We must not forget the work of Moravian and Methodist missionaries from Europe on Nicaragua's and Costa Rica's coasts. Still, in general, only when missionaries from the United States arrived did real Protestant penetration into Hispanic and indigenous Central America begin.

After 1900 Pentecostal mission work began. The Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) was the pioneer in Guatemala. Charles Furnam split with his Free Methodist sponsors to work with the Church of God.³⁴ Presently, Pentecostal missions are almost too numerous to catalog throughout Central America. Some are denominational; many come from individual congregations.

³⁰ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *Christianity in a Revolutionary Age: The Nineteenth Century Outside Europe* (New York: Harper, 1961), 302.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Winn, 93.

³³ Latourette, *Expansion*, VII, 116.

³⁴ Nelson, 64.

Pentecostal congregations send a few missionaries to Central p. 234 America and organize churches in the villages or cities where they settle. Often their exclusivistic gospel precludes cooperation with other groups, even Pentecostals. Their doctrines require a baptism with the Holy Spirit as manifested by speaking in tongues. Such practices are divisive. More than once, mainline churches have lost many members and congregations to the ‘Pentecostal wolves,’ as they term their ostensible brothers in the faith. The Northern Presbytery of the Guatemalan Presbyterian Church was decimated in the 1960s by proselytizing Pentecostals. That presbytery saw several churches close; others dropped to a handful of worshippers.

While the Pentecostals brought new vigor to tradition-bound churches, often they took born-again believers into their congregations. Looking at this phenomenon in historical perspective, it is ironic to find established Protestant denominations complaining about johnny-come-lately Pentecostals in the same terms that the RCC excoriated the first Protestants a century ago.³⁵

Finally, such specialized Protestant ministries as Wycliffe Bible Translators, World Vision, World Relief, Inc., Church World Service, Mennonite Central Committee and so on have burgeoned in Central America. Of those, Wycliffe has the longest history. It began in Guatemala in 1931 when Cameron Townsend, himself a CAM worker, translated and published the Ca’kchiquel New Testament.³⁶ Relief and development organizations have been working most intensively in Central America since natural disasters swept three countries in the 1970s. The 1972 Managua earthquake stimulated massive relief and continuing development efforts from many Protestant organizations. Though some organizations have recently curtailed work, many agencies weathered the transition from Somoza to the Sandinistas and continue to work in the new political climate.

Similarly, Hurricane Fifi in Honduras in 1975 brought missions and missionaries there. This also happened in Guatemala following the 1976 earthquake.

The latest MARC *Mission Handbook* lists 253 North American Protestant missions active in Central America.³⁷ (Since some agencies work in more than one country, not all 253 are different.) As of 1976, 1148 Protestant missionaries were working in those countries; by 1980 there were 12,940. To isolate one country, the PROCADES survey p. 235 tallies 210 different organizations working in Guatemala. Many have only one congregation; others are substantial denominations. PROCADES counts 6448 congregations and mission stations as reported by the various churches. More than 50 of those churches relate to international organizations with headquarters in the United States.³⁸

Here we have been as specific as available research permitted. After viewing the history and current statistics, we see that North American Protestants continue to take our Lord’s Great Commission seriously. They have gone and baptized with unabated zeal. We will discuss some of the content of the teaching and discipling in the next section.

WHAT THEOLOGIES HAVE THEY TAUGHT?

³⁵ Winn, 99.

³⁶ Nelson, 62.

³⁷ Samuel Wilson, ed., *Mission Handbook: North American Protestant Ministries Overseas* (12th ed.; Monrovia, California: MARC, 1979), 39–45.

³⁸ PROCADES, *Directorio de Iglesias, Organizaciones y Ministerios del Movimiento Protestante: Guatemala* (San José, Costa Rica: INDEF and SEPAL, 1981), 19–63.

Even though we have not treated the official theologies of the various denominations and missions, some theological themes of the Protestant movement have been limned. Using the backdrop we have sketched and some recent changes in the religious-political situation, we can meaningfully discuss the impact of North American theology.

Protestant zeal has not lessened. Numbers of the missionaries and agencies attest to that. Like Roman Catholics who preceded them by 350 years, Protestants came to Central America to bring light. Theirs, however, was the light of personal Christianity, not that of Christendom. Latourette describes the Catholicism that Protestants encountered as 'anemic' and 'parasitic,' top-heavy with imported priests,³⁹ shot through with superstition and moral and political corruption.⁴⁰ For many missionaries in Central America, Latourette's pre-Vatican II assessment remains contemporary. Few Catholic clergy today will dispute the need to attack superstition. Nevertheless, this initial Protestant attitude of superiority itself characterized their mission theology and practice.

It bespoke an attitude of superiority that soon combined with a beleaguered minority complex. All early Protestant accounts I know often refer to overt opposition from Roman Catholic clergy and congregations. Pioneer CAM pastor Albert E. Bishop wrote of priests who opposed missionaries, in 1905 a Catholic procession on Good Friday wrecked the CAM building in Guatemala City and threatened to destroy the work entirely. U.S. governmental intervention persuaded p. 236 the Guatemalan authorities to pay for the damages.⁴¹ No one should underestimate the depth of anti-Protestant feeling on the part of the RCC, but more significantly on the part of the populace. Wilton Nelson claims:

For Central Americans, Roman Catholicism had come nearly to be what the Hebrew religion was for Jews. This was the case to such an extent that many considered conversion to Protestantism as a betrayal of their race.⁴²

The attitude of superiority is easy for North American Protestants to understand. To Central Americans, however, who had recently won political independence from Spain, the Protestants' attitude bore more than religious import. It held both a religious and political threat. They were Central Americans and they were Catholics. To them then, as often today, Protestant missionaries represented a threat not unlike the rogue English pirates mentioned earlier.

Today it is hard to find North American missionaries who do not at least recognize the cultural-religiopolitical barriers they face. Still, because Protestantism has contributed to Central America's culture and spiritual vitality, it is just as difficult to find missionaries who take those problems seriously. Forty years ago, Kenneth Scott Latourette wrote:

Culturally, Latin America and the United States were separated by a vast gulf.... The United States was suspect in Latin America as a potential aggressor, especially after its territorial gains at the expense of Mexico and its policies in Central America and the Caribbean.... That, under these circumstances, the Protestant churches of the United States inaugurated extensive enterprises among the Roman Catholics of Latin America ... was not due to

³⁹ Latourette, *Revolutionary Age*, 285.

⁴⁰ *Idem*, *Expansion*, V, 109.

⁴¹ Winn, 99, 101.

⁴² Nelson, 44, author's translation.

political or imperial commercialism. It came about through the missionary purpose of these churches which regarded the entire human race as their field.⁴³

The missionary zeal is admirable. Missionaries did not see themselves as the vanguard of North American interests. Nevertheless, neither did they show much awareness of the charged situation into which they threw themselves. The anti-Protestantism they experienced at the hands of warring Catholics contained more than a hint of anti-Americanism. If in general Central Americans considered Catholicism an integral part of their identity, they surely saw the same mixture of identity in North American Protestant missionaries. When we further p. 237 recall that new-style Central American rulers such as Justo Rufino Barrios actively wooed both Protestant immigrants and missionaries,⁴⁴ we see North American Protestants heading into potentially compromising situations like proverbial innocents abroad.

Nevertheless, despite the barriers, Protestantism has grown dramatically. PROCADES research indicates that perhaps 25 percent of Guatemalans now consider themselves Protestants. The astounding growth of the 'wolfish sect,' as the Archbishopric of Guatemala called Protestantism in 1911,⁴⁵ emphasizes the accuracy of Orlando Costas' two-pronged observation:

Evangelical Protestantism represents a transplanted historical phenomenon which continues to maintain its link with (and theological dependence on) the Evangelical Movement of the Anglo-Saxon world, predominantly in its North American variant.... This reality, however, does not abrogate the fact that traditional Evangelical characteristics have become *such a fundamental part of the theology of a segment of Latin American Protestants* [italics mine] that it is hard to deny it without also denying its existence.... The theology of Latin American Evangelicalism must be seen in the light of its Anglo-Saxon progenitor and counterpart.⁴⁶

Because Latin American Protestantism from North American roots is now part of the cultural and religious ambience, it is the more imperative to come to grips with its accompanying political implications.

We should be wary of a 'detective view of history' that Xabier Gorostiaga and Costas warn about.⁴⁷ At the same time we must realize that Christian missionaries are, consciously or not, 'part of a worldwide system that often uses people, movements and institutions for purposes other than the communication of the Gospel and its liberating power.'⁴⁸ In the past, few realized that they were bearing both a religious and a political message. We cannot retrace the thoughts of John C. Hill and his Presbyterian supervisors. Still, the questions burn today: Did they not realize that by accepting privileges from Barrios' government they were falling into a trap not unlike that into which the RCC fell by ceding patronage to Spain and Portugal during colonization? Did not they and mission boards since then draw any connection between their actions and Constantine's legitimization p. 238 of the early Christian Church in the fourth century? Similarly, when

⁴³ Latourette, *Expansion*, V, 112.

⁴⁴ See Nelson, 49.

⁴⁵ Winn, 99.

⁴⁶ Costas, *Crossroads*, p.15, note.

⁴⁷ Orlando E. Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1982), 66.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Albert E. Bishop and the CAM used the U.S. government so forcefully to win compensation for destroyed property, did they never think of the political message that action carried?

Examples of blind spots abound. The building of the Central Presbyterian Church in Guatemala City is built on a parcel of land earlier donated to it by Guatemala's government. Today the church lies behind the National Palace across the street from the Presidential Guard headquarters and adjacent to the Presidential Residence.

Overt political involvement by Protestants has been taboo until recently; unconscious political yea-saying has been part of their identity for decades. While today they are becoming active in partisan politics, conscious education regarding political issues has never been an integral part of Protestants' lives in Guatemala or Central America. This ignorance was part of the self-imposed taboo on politics. In order to avoid controversy, Protestantism has not carried out political evangelism in Central America.

Unofficially, however, leadership has sought approval of governing authorities or has maintained silence in the face of abuses by civil authorities. During the November 1982 Centennial celebration of Guatemalan Protestantism, thousands of sincere, joyous *evangélicos* crowded Guatemala City. They came from all over the country to celebrate 100 years of Protestantism. Their celebration was marred. Instead of being permitted to celebrate their faith, those thousands were manipulated by Protestant and governmental leaders in the final mass meeting on Guatemala's military parade ground, Campo Mare. Luis Palau's sermon urged them to obey governmental authorities. On the dais with him were Protestant church leaders, members of the Chamber of Commerce and Guatemalan cabinet ministers. Then-President Efraín Ríos Montt spoke last and closed with prayer. These sad facts exemplify some of the negative results of admirable, though naive, missionary zeal. Some sectors of Protestantism no longer fall prey to such naivete or subsequent manipulation.⁴⁹

We can discern in part why this political naivete resulted by looking at another theological given of Protestantism in Central America. Protestants went representing the Reformation. As we saw, the Bible societies made the first approach by bringing the previously unknown Bible. Such a method was crucial, but in fact it represented Reformation principles only partially. *Sola scriptura* was a Reformation byword, but incorporated within that slogan was a powerful doctrine p. 239 of the Church and its universal unity. Although the Reformers left the RCC, they did so reluctantly. By the nineteenth century such reluctance was an anachronism among many Protestants. State churches and denominationalism had turned Europe and the United States into a crazy-quilt of groups with many similar doctrines but virtually no organizational unity. Churches split and formed new denominations for an incredible variety of reasons that Calvin and Luther never dreamed of as legitimate.

An even greater multitude of churches sprouted in Central America. Despite the attempts at unity that we will mention, ecclesiology has never been a long suit of Central American Protestantism, nor of its forebears; with rare exceptions ecclesiology has become a travesty. As pointed out earlier, some sense of need for unity did produce results, both among mainline Protestants and some para-church missions that organized denominations. Latourette points out:

A feature of the advance of Protestantism was the development of cooperation among some of the major Protestant bodies represented in Latin America.... It was given impetus ... by the criticism leveled at Protestants in that area that in contrast with the impressive

⁴⁹ See William Cook's article in the *MQR* for examples.

facade of unity presented by the Roman Catholic Church ... Protestants were patently divided.⁵⁰

Thus Central America saw the birth of various *comities*. These divided a region into sections into which no signatory denomination would intrude. Such an attempt at Protestant ecumenism thrived for a time in Guatemala with the organization of the Evangelical Synod in 1935.⁵¹ But the cooperation was short-lived. The Synod's unity broke down in the face of interdenominational squabbles and the arrival of freewheeling Pentecostals. Apart from some established Pentecostal denominations, independent Pentecostal groups helped dissolve Protestant unity by the proselytizing mentioned earlier.

By not emphasizing Protestant unity as an indispensable mark of the true Church of Jesus Christ, later Protestant missionaries and their missions accepted as a full Gospel something that was missing an integral part. Within established Protestantism we see the potential for fragmentation. The CAM, we recall, hoped to spread Bible teaching; that was part of its identity. Establishing churches was a *means*, but the Church was not, in much Protestant thinking, 'the pillar and ground of the truth' ([1 Timothy 3:15](#)). The CAM did join the Evangelical Synod of Guatemala and is currently a member of the loose Evangelical Alliance [p. 240](#) there, but that Alliance is a far cry from the dream of the Synod's organizers. Similarly, Bible societies distributed Scriptures, but operated with little thought of ecclesiastical organization. In connection with this, Wilton Nelson comments:

This way of thinking provided a strong push to mission work, but at times it resulted in shallow work, in neglect and even lack of appreciation for those aspects of mission and church work that have no direct relationship with evangelism.⁵²

Lack of orientation toward ecclesiastical unity profoundly affects the message of salvation a church preaches. With no importance attached to organizational brotherhood, sociological ties among sister and brother in Christ will be correspondingly weak. If a congregation splits over personal differences between two leaders, two congregations result. Both profess the same God, but when one member suffers, contrary to [1 Corinthians 12:14](#) ff., members of other denominations or other congregations do not feel the hurt and hence do not respond as a unit. Pastors, leaders, and layworkers have been kidnapped in Guatemala. Both fear of reprisal by authorities and false accusations that the victims were communists help reinforce a lack of solidarity among members of Christ's body. Protestant churches in Guatemala have not been willing to take up the cause of their suffering members except by way of exception.⁵³

Such readiness to avoid problems makes the fragmented Protestant churches easy prey for governments that wish to secure a Protestant seal of approval as Roman Catholic support wanes. Not willing to lose the privileges of freedom of worship granted after much suffering, Protestant leaders accept or court government blessing. To outside observers, overt political involvement as church institutions seems a spurious application of [Romans 13:1](#) and an inconsistent turnabout. Many Protestant churches long preached that politics was of the devil; when Jesus returns *only* He will clean up that realm. Thus,

⁵⁰ Latourette, *Expansion*, VII, 172.

⁵¹ Nelson, 65.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 54, author's translation.

⁵³ I have argued this point in 'Searching for Ways of Mission in Revolution,' *Reformed Ecumenical Synod Mission Bulletin*, August 1983.

involvement in *la política* was taboo. A naivete related to that discussed earlier developed in the face of imported political ideas that were considered part of Christianity. Although Protestants were not hearing expressly political issues in their churches' ministries, the message that invading communism was responsible for *any* social unrest got through. Lack of full-orbed Christian education on political issues turned Christians gullible. So when dictators equate their p. 241 policies with God's will, many bewildered Christians embrace those ideas uncritically. There is, though, a tragic flipside to this acceptance: Some believers who have suffered for their faith become suspicious of such capitulation on the part of their leaders. Those people reject the partial faith that serves neither them nor the Gospel well.

Thus a partial faith is tied in closely with the development of a partial theology. Both are products of imported attitudes and teachings. The locus of the partial theology largely responsible for creating blind spots is the eschatology that has become the tail that wags the dog. The dispensationalism mentioned earlier combines with a premillennialism that awaits Christ's 1000-year rule. This theology first came from the CAM, but it has spread to most evangelical and Pentecostal churches as well.

Originally, dispensational theology helped create missionary urgency. Today its eschatology has become caricatured and occupies altogether too large a part of the message of salvation. In its popular forms, all focuses on the rapture of the Church; believers are preoccupied with being on the right side of the rapture.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the selections from prophecy that dispensationalist preachers use put a political tint on their messages. Those who accept and preach this caricatured form of dispensationalism constantly, and perhaps knowingly, become effective public relations agents for dictatorial governments. Their perception of the Soviet Union as the beast from the North also coincides with U.S. foreign policy toward Central America. In turn, Protestant churches that preach this message do the very thing that they wished to avoid: they become politicized.

Premillennial dispensationalism need not fall into such a trap. If handled responsibly, as several dispensationalist writers and teachers are doing, dispensational theology still focuses on eschatology.⁵⁵ It properly relates the Kingdom of God, however, to God's cosmic rule and well-being for all his people without making the United States and Israel guardians of the Kingdom's future.

Another Protestant doctrine also has fallen into caricature by misuse. Despite their divisiveness, the Pentecostals have awakened their members to the importance of divine miracles, particularly as they apply to illnesses. While this renewed emphasis is a needed corrective, a mutant form has, predictably, developed. In classic theology, miracles are considered part of God's cosmic rule of p. 242 Providence. Recent over-emphasis on miracle in Pentecostalism has raised to a cardinal rule of faith the need to experience miracles for every ache and pain. Fruit of the faith has become creed.

Although itself a serious problem like so much else in Central America, it has found political expression. When Ríos Montt came to power in Guatemala many evangelicals immediately viewed his *coupe d'état* as a miracle. At last God had shown some power in an area he had left to Satan's minions for so long. Such a conclusion ignores Providence in failing to recognize God's work in processes and not just in lightning bolts. When Ríos Montt fell after months of gradual slippage, some Protestants were trying to unsay things they had said while he was in power. Such a concrete example of misapplication of a true

⁵⁴ Nelson, 54.

⁵⁵ See for example Emilio Antonio Núñez, 'La Naturaleza del Reino de Dios,' *El Reino de Dios y América Latina*, C. René Padilla, ed. (Casa Bautista de Publicaciones, 1975), 17-36.

and necessary doctrine is not, however, unique to Guatemala. Not a few left-leaning *evangélicos* in Nicaragua saw the Sandinista victory as the anteroom to God's kingdom. There, as more recently in Guatemala, conscientious biblical political education as part of ongoing discipleship could have avoided grievous errors.

CONCLUSION

In review, we see that North American missions have made a significant impact on Central America. In a positive sense, Protestant missions have served God's purposes by distributing His Word; they have won millions to Christ; they and their churches have improved the physical and spiritual lives of many by freeing them from vices, by establishing training schools and establishing institutions of higher learning. Nevertheless, the theology accompanying much of this work has been partial, superficial and often politically tendentious. In a negative sense, we see a fragmented Protestantism that has not been able to unite, despite several long-term and notable attempts. Most recently the ill feelings between the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI) and the Latin American Evangelical Confederation (CONELA) illustrate anew the divisions. The competition began to emerge only after CLAI appeared to gain a foothold among many churches. The divisions and fragility of unions have permitted Protestantism to fall into political traps. In politically charged Central America such partisanship threatens to separate Christians ever further.

By no means is all grim, however. Protestantism grew in Central America by the fruit of God's Word—*sola scriptura*. Another foundational doctrine of the Reformation—the priesthood of all believers—also functions biblically by providing leaders who live the [p. 243](#) grace and faith of [Ephesians 2:11–12](#). Even more significantly, we must note in concluding that in the camp of the once-enemy Roman Catholics, those two doctrines are helping to bring about grassroots and some institutional changes that may portend a unity of Christian sisters and brothers once more.

James C. Dekker is a missionary under Christian Reformed World Mission, and formerly on the Presbyterian Seminary faculty, Guatemala City. [p. 244](#)

Key Issues in Missiology Today

John Gration

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It needs to be recognized at the outset that any agenda of missiological issues will to a degree be inevitably determined by one's perspectives. These include one's theological perspective. The agenda of the conciliar movement differs considerably from that movement which is commonly designated evangelical. The agenda likewise varies between those who are Reformed and those who come out of a non-Reformed tradition.