Evangelical Review of Theology

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 34 · Number 4 · October 2010

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by

Paternoster:
thinking faith

WEA
World Evangelical Alliance
Theological Commission

for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

ent and do not affect by any means the total picture the church in Latin America presents, that is, a church without a theology, without conscientious reflection that serves the Word of God.[10]

What Padilla wrote in the early seventies is still relevant today. There is a need to work out a Latin American evangelical theology. Today if we visit a church, a seminary, or a Bible institute in any country of Latin America we will probably find mostly translated textbooks and curricula. For example, as of today, there is no systematic theology text written by Latin Americans. What we see in the majority of churches is a flood of books by the evangelical gurus from the North without any criteria to filter them. You can find books by Don Carson or Wayne Grudem alongside books written by Benny Hinn and Jerry Falwell. The predominant tendency today is the so called 'prosperity gospel' even among some traditional denominations. Only a handful of churches know the theological proposal that the Latin American Theological Fraternity-FTL has developed in four decades of work. By and large, theological dependency still characterizes the evangelical church in Latin America.

Thus, evangelicals in Latin America are still searching for their identity. In spite of decades of indigenous leadership and national denominations we have not yet answered in unison the question of what it means to be the people of God in this continent. Most have their eyes fixed on the North Atlantic theological and methodological latest trends. Maybe we are experiencing a prolonged adolescence, procrastinating as long as possible being responsible adults. We need to be centred in the Scriptures and totally dependent on the Holy Spirit to take the challenge of becoming an instrument of transformation in God's hands.

But so far we have remained at the fringes of history. A university student told me once that if one day evangelicals completely disappear nobody will miss them. They contribute almost nothing to civil society in a macro-level. Since this conversation I have tried to show otherwise, but the more I research the more difficult it is to find hard evidence to prove that is not the case. Perhaps I should revisit more often my father's journey and see what his conversion has meant not only for him but mainly for me.

10 C. René Padilla, 'La Teología en Latinoamérica', *Pensamiento Cristiano* 19, no. 75 (1972): 206.

ERT (2010) 34:4, 313-318

Poverty and the Gospel: The Case of Haiti

Dieumeme Noelliste (USA)

KEYWORDS: *Theodicy, colonialism, nationalism, missions, evangelism justice, health*

POVERTY IS PERHAPS the most stubborn and troubling ill of our world. It is a plague that affects a very large portion of the human race and keeps billions from reaching the potential that God intends for them. Because it interferes with the fulfillment of God's purpose for human life, it is an ill that must be combated by the gospel wherever it is found—its stubbornness notwithstanding.

Perhaps in no other part of the world has this enemy of human flourishing been more voracious and brutal than the Caribbean nation of Haiti—my homeland. Although situated in a region of the world classified as middle income, Haiti has never moved remotely close to that status during its life as a nation. Once recognized as the most productive of France's many colonies, the country, which has earned the distinction of being the first independent black republic of the world and a beacon of freedom in the Americas, has been reputed as the poorest country in the western hemisphere.

For Haitians, this label which has become a leading descriptor for the country has always been a cause of great angst. It pains us because it virtually overshadows all the positive features of the country's culture, its proud achievements, and the positive traits of the character of its people. It grieves us even more intensely when we realize that, though pejorative, the description is nonetheless accurate.

The evidence in support of the unfavourable assessment is irrefutable and apparent to the naked eye. The statistics establishing the country's appalling condition are common knowledge: eighty percent of the population of 9,000,000 live under the poverty line. Fifty percent of these live in abject poverty, surviving on a pittance of $1 per day. Well over fifty percent of the population is illiterate. Two-thirds of its workforce is unemployed. Thousands are working in near slavery conditions in the sugar cane plantations of the Dominican Republic.

Dieumeme Noelliste *(PhD Northwestern) is Professor of Theological Ethics and Director of the Grounds Institute for Public Ethics at Denver Seminary, Colorado USA. He was previously President of the Caribbean Graduate School of Theology and of the Jamaica Theological Seminary. He studied law in his home country at the State University of Haiti.*

Eighty percent of the land, which was once called the Pearl of the Antilles on account of its natural beauty and wealth is denuded and suffers from severe deforestation. Hundreds of thousands of children are orphans. One in eight suffers from malnutrition, and untold thousands live in virtual slavery in a condition called 'restavek'.[1] Little wonder that the country ranks 146 of 177 when measured by the U.N. Human Development Index.

As if this situation were not dismal enough, the country has just been visited by the worst disaster in its history. The 7.0 earthquake that shook the island on January 12 has ravaged Port-au-Prince, reducing the capital city of 2 million to rubble. Mercilessly, it destroyed what little infrastructure the country had, demolished thousands of homes and public buildings, and claimed some two hundred and thirty thousand lives. The disaster will certainly result in a further lowering of the country's already poor ranking. Perhaps now it will be known as the poorest country in the world. Preliminary estimates put the cost of the devastation at ten billion U.S. dollars. The country's GDP is only 7.0 billion U.S. dollars!

Most of the victims of the tragedy are the poor. They were those who lived in the flimsy huts and were pulverized in the wake of the mighty shakeup. Others perished needlessly because of the inability of a bankrupt government to provide the barest of help to the citizens when they needed it most. Poverty was their lot in life and it continued to haunt them in death. The treatment they received in death clearly showed that their predicament was that of poverty of being and personhood.

But this land which for two centuries now has been the bastion of misery and suffering is not foreign to Christianity. It is not one of those 'pagan' places where the name of God is unknown, where Christ is rejected, the Bible questioned, and the church persecuted. Indeed, in the midst of their tragic and horrible travail Haitians prayed and sang to God. They did not heed Mrs. Job's advice to 'curse God and die', rather they turned to him urging their fellow sufferers to 'accept Jesus'. There is, of course, a theodicy question that could detain us long, but I will not allow it. My concern is a different one. It is a query to the Christian faith about its failure to allow the gospel to exert its transforming influence in the Haitian landscape.

Since the sixteenth century, the Christian presence on the island has been strong. Introduced first in the form of Roman Catholicism by the European colonizers, the Christian religion was received with open arms by both the Indians who inhabited the island at the time of the 'discovery' and the blacks who were brought in from Africa to replace them as slave labourers following the decimation of the original population. Even in the face of the inhumanity of slavery perpetrated against the Africans by the 'evangelizers' themselves, the slaves continued to embrace Christianity warmly. If it is

1 'Restavek' is Creole for 'living with'. It is a conflation of the French verb 'rester' and the French preposition 'avec'. A 'restavek' is a child whose condition of deprivation forces him or her to live with a family other than his/her own for food and shelter in exchange for the performance of unpaid manual labour.

argued that theirs was a hybrid religion which reflected more their ancestral beliefs than biblical faith, one must remember that the Christianity to which they were introduced was by no means virgin. It was itself far from being faithful to biblical teaching.

For its part, immediately following emancipation and the proclamation of a hard-won independence in 1804, Protestantism made its entry into the country with missionaries coming from the United Kingdom and the United States. While Catholicism continued to remain the dominant and official faith of the new nation, Protestantism gradually earned a substantial share of the country's population, with explosive growth occurring during the second half of the last century. Already by the mid-1980s Protestantism claimed some twenty-five percent of the country's population. This means that when the shares of the two religious sectors are added up, we have a Christian presence of over eighty percent! Even when allowance is made for the phenomenon of syncretism, which is reportedly more prevalent within Catholicism than Protestantism, the Christian presence is still considerable. The obvious question to Christianity then is: how can so much of it and so much poverty coexist so comfortably and for so long?

There are many claimants to the tragic predicament that plagues this corner of God's creation. Because there are too many to unpack in this brief paper, I will focus on the two causes which bear more directly, on the theme of poverty and justice and the challenge they pose for the authentic gospel proclamation. Any objective exploration into the Haitian situation cannot fail to focus on the total isolation of the country by the colonial powers in response to the success of the Haitian revolution and the subsequent proclamation of its independence from France. Construed as a 'bad' example and a dangerous threat to the prevailing global colonial system, the powers that held sway on the global scene were determined to kill that chicken in the egg. They did so by denying the country its rightful place in the concert of nations, arguing that such an admission would be detrimental to their economic interest and would deal a devastating blow to the reigning racist ideology. With its back against the wall, Haiti was forced to pay a whopping 150,000,000 golden franks to France in exchange for its recognition of the country's hard won independence. France's imprimatur was considered by its colonial counterparts a prerequisite for their own recognition and the subsequent ending of the global economic and political embargo that was slapped against the fledgling and embattled new nation.

It is well established practice that, in wars, the winners get the spoils. In Haiti's case, however, the reverse obtained! The victor was required to reward the vanquished for the 'insolence' of winning and the audacity of cutting himself from the shackles of oppression. Hence, instead of concentrating on building itself as a nation, for the next hundred years, Haiti would be forced to use its very meagre resources to pay its 'debt' to France. At today's rate, the crushing indemnity amounts to $21 billion—three times the size of the country's present GDP!

This was an injustice from which the country would be hard pressed to recover. Any question about its impact

on the future of the fledgling new nation should be settled by the recognition that even today, short of war, economic and political isolation is the most effective weapon that is resorted to when efforts are made to bring a country on its knees and force it to fall in line. Yet, as has often been the case throughout the history of the church, global Christianity was silent in the face of the crushing injustice that was meted out to Haiti. In both of its expressions, it will make valiant efforts to spread the faith by deploying a constant flow of missionaries in the country, but by and large it will keep aloof from justice issues such as the one highlighted above. Indeed, such commitment has been viewed as a necessary trade off for what was deemed more valuable: the 'freedom' to preach the 'gospel'. Are there burning justice issues in our world today that the church is willing to overlook in exchange for the freedom to preach a truncated gospel?

Besides this external factor, there is an internal culprit for the situation of wretchedness that we are bemoaning. My acquaintance with the Haitian landscape, and my life experience in that land of deprivation, leaves no doubt in my mind that the kind of gospel that Haitian Christianity has propounded in the country over the years has a great deal to do with the condition that prevailed in the land. I don't want to be misunderstood here. It is beyond question that Christian faith has contributed to the salvation and social uplift of countless thousands of individual Haitians—myself included. But what should be clear is that Christian faith has not been allowed to have a commensurate impact on the nation's corporate landscape.

The reason for this is to be found in the fact that, through the years, Haitian Christianity, in both of its expressions, has left untouched a crucially important sector of public life: the political sphere. As many thinkers have shown, Catholicism did so by its close alliance with the temporal power. Recently Laennec Hurbon, for instance, has demonstrated in his book, *Religions et Lien Social*, that from the colonial period well into the late 1900s, the Catholic church in Haiti has served as an arm of the state, obediently executing the bidding of the political directorate. By virtue of its closeness to the powers that be, the church lacked all ability to engage the political sphere critically.[2] Laennec took pains to show that because Francois Duvalier (the Father) knew this well, early on in his regime, he made the subjugation of the church a top priority.

For its part, Protestantism contributed to the same phenomenon but by adopting the opposite stance: total disengagement. For Haitian Protestantism, when it comes to the relationship between the church and the state, the watchword and bedrock principle is a-politicalism. In an exhaustive study entitled *Le Protestantisme Dans la Societe Haitienne*, sociologist theologian, Charles Poisset Romain has shown that for Protestants of all colours, the church should have no say in things political except praying for those in authority.

2 Laennec Hurbon, *Religions et Lien Social* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 2004), 217, 224-229.

Through meticulous empirical research, Poisset has demonstrated that this Protestant desertion of the political domain is due to the erection of a rigid dichotomy between the spiritual and the temporal, the hereafter and the now, the church and the world. For Haitian Protestants, the gospel is believed to hold sway in the first set of realities, but is said to be *persona non grata* in the second.[3] The net consequence of this stance is the abandonment of the political domain to its own devices. It contributed to the emergence of a public square bereft of evangelical witness and prophetic challenge.

In places where rigorous systems of checks and balances exist, this withdrawal from the political arena might not be catastrophic. But in a country such as Haiti where these things are virtually nonexistent, the absence of a rigorous gospel critique meant absolute power and total lack of accountability on the part of the powers that be.[4] This absence of accountability, not the country's economic status, is what explains the nonexistence of the most basic structure of services for the society in general and the poor in particular. All suffer from such reprehensible neglect, but the poor suffer even more dearly.

Here again, I don't want to be misunderstood. The church and the numerous social service agencies that are working in the country have done a lot to alleviate poverty and provide a whole gamut of social services to assist the poor. As bad as the Haitian predicament is, it would have been worse without their effort. But though helpful and necessary, such action has its limits. It cannot result in the establishment of the kind of structures and institutions which are capable of transforming the centuries-old culture of poverty. These can come only from the political powers which have control over all of the country's resources. To deliver these basic goods for the welfare of the society in general and the poor in particular, they must be challenged, since it is not in their DNA to do so unprompted.

In a context such as Haiti, to meaningfully serve the poor, the church can no longer afford to preach a gospel devoid of a political edge. To blunt that edge is to nullify its transforming potential and make it into an accomplice of the status quo. The political directorate knows this well. That is why it never tires of reminding the church that its role is confined to the 'spiritual' and that it must not trespass on the political. The church must reject such reductionism and rigid dualism. It needs to realize that because the gospel aims at the enjoyment of the fullness of life, of necessity, it carries serious political implications. The political sphere bears enormously on the kind of life that people live. Indeed, its very reason for being is to promote

3 Charles Poisset Romain, *Le Protestantisme Dans la Sociétéï Haïtienne* (Port-au-Prince: Henri Deschamps, 1985), 234-279.

4 There are certainly good reasons for this absence of evangelical critique. The climate of political repression and the denial of basic human rights throughout the country's history and particularly during the Duvalierian dynasty made such witness extremely dangerous. My point here, however, is not to explain the reasons for the absence of that witness, but to underscore the *consequence* of that absence.

and enhance the experience of life. Its purpose is to serve the common good. To remove that sphere from the purview of the gospel and exempt it from its critique is to castrate the gospel itself and render it impotent in a society that desperately needs its transforming ferment.

It is beyond question that these days of suffering, disgrace, and shame are the darkest in the history of the country. But they will not be its final moments. In fact, I see in them a critical juncture, a turning point for a better tomorrow. I see in these calamities the unprecedented opportunity for the church to resolve to proclaim, live, and demonstrate the full gospel in the Haitian context. Three factors combine to make this moment opportune.

First, if anyone ever thought that it was a benign matter for a society to have a completely unaccountable government, the tragedy of January 12 should disabuse them of such a misguided view. In the aftermath of the earthquake, it is evident to all that thousands of lives would have been saved if the country were equipped with the most basic disaster preparedness and response system, and if it had a government that felt the obligation to provide a modicum of leadership in that moment of crisis. Feeling completely unanswerable, the government was missing in action. And that irresponsiveness proved fatal not only to the poor, but the rich as well. Until help arrived from the international community, the people were their own first responders, performing rescue operations with bare hands.

Second, while in the past, the church could cite repression and the fear of reprisals as existential reasons for its posture of disengagement from the political domain, the recent loosening of the political knot with the advent of multi-party politics and the recognition of some freedom of expression undoubtedly render such explanation no longer compelling. The risks of retaliation and recrimination still exist. But the opportunity for the church to assert itself and reclaim its right to speak prophetically has never been greater. The church must not let that opportunity slip away. It must seize it, and resolve to no longer allow the political power to take it away.

Third, in recent times, various bodies within global evangelism have been awakened to the truth that if the evangelical witness is to have a chance of transforming society in any meaningful way, and in so doing improve the plight of the poor, such a witness must go beyond poverty alleviation and the provision of social services. It must include social action and social advocacy. At this time, if the Haitian church musters the courage to embrace the challenge of political engagement,[5] it will find much encouragement and support from the broader evangelical world. Let us hope that it will do so.

5 By political engagement, I am not talking about involvement in partisan politics. I am convinced that the church, as a corporate body, should stay out of this in order to maintain the integrity of its prophetic witness. It is essentially this prophetic witness, this advocacy and push for the creation of an environment conducive to the flourishing of human life, that I call political engagement.

ERT (2010) 34:4, 319-334

Edinburgh 2010 and the Evangelicals

Klaus Fiedler

Keywords: Ecumenical movement, unity, revivals, missionary societies, faith missions, classical missions, conversion, ecclesiology

I Edinburgh 1910 in Context

Edinburgh 1910 was a huge success, and success always has many fathers, including some who only claim to be such. As the Christian world (or much of it) celebrates this event after 100 years, there are several heirs, all claiming that they continue with the spirit, or the achievements, or the structures of that conference.

I was first alerted to this syndrome when the World Student Christian Federation in 1985 seized the opportunity of the 75th anniversary of Edinburgh 1910 to celebrate it with its own conference.[1] Was not Edinburgh 1910 organized by John Mott of the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM), the forerunner of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF)? John Mott was indeed influenced by the SVM, and the WSCF was indeed its successor, but Edinburgh 1910 was not a students' conference. When finally Edinburgh 1985 took place, what happened there seemed to bear little resemblance to what had excited the Christian (or at least the Protestant) world so much 75 years before. The main speakers were: Emilio Castro (then WCC General Secretary), Kosuke Koyama, Annathaie Abayasekera, Enrique Dussel, Orlando Costas, Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Leonardo Appies. They mostly looked for the 'Greater Christ' of whom John Mott had spoken at the end of the Conference. The 'Greater Christ' was seen as the liberator from economic and political oppression, leaving little room for the 'smaller' Christ as saviour and liberator from sin, or for the mission

1 In the invitation also shared the World Council of Churches, the British Council of Churches, and 15 churches and missions.

Dr Klaus Fielder *(ThD Heidelberg; PhD Dar-es-Salaam University) who has worked in Africa for more than forty years, is Professor of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, Mzuzu University, and previously taught at the University of Malawi, Zomba. He is also guest Professor of Missiology at the Evangelical Theological Faculty, Leuven, Belgium. His best known book is* The Story of Faith Missions: From Hudson Taylor to Present Day Africa *(2nd ed., Regnun, 1995); he is the author of a number of other works published in Africa. (Contact: kfiedler@mzuni.ac.mw)*