

A Historic Transformation

In 1950, the mediaeval form of Catholicism dominant in Latin American had held a hegemonic and brutal control of the entire region for nearly 500 years. It had imposed its beliefs by the edge of the sword from the beginning and the devastating poverty and corruption endemic to the region must be attributed to that belief system because of the worldview that it had imposed! During that time, the percentage of the population that would have claimed Catholicism as their religion hovered at very nearly 100% as to profess any other religious belief would have meant near certain death. In Colombia alone somewhere between 250,000 and 350,000 people were killed for something so benign as listening to a broadcast of Transworld Radio or HCJB. To be found with a copy of the Bible, a book that was banned in the entire region, would have almost certainly resulted in the death of that person. It was a time when darkness reigned throughout the entire region.

During nearly five hundred years it had been illegal for missionaries to enter the region, to preach the Gospel, or to import or even own a copy of the Bible. Even the slightest hint of disobedience meant certain death. Then in the 1950's winds of change began to blow. The initial changes began in two forms. Greater access to news and ideas from around the world started political movements to challenge the status quo. Liberalism, in the form of a generally leftist slant, started to bring new ideas on how to govern and the function of religion in society. While these movements often tended to be anti-religion, they did challenge the absolute authority of the Catholic church. At the same time, both radio broadcasts and a colporter movement begin to bring access to the Bible. The very fact that the Bible was banned was creating a significant curiosity about the Bible in the newly opened minds of an enlightened generation throughout Latin America. In Colombia, there were many colporters who landed on Barranquilla and headed into the interior of the country, never to be seen nor heard from again! They were brave individuals for whom the spreading of God's Word was more important than life itself!

To become receive a Bible or worse yet, to become a Biblical Christian of any sort was also very dangerous any local person. Those were difficult and dangerous times and any progress of the Gospel seemed to be agonizing slow as well as very dangerous. Latin America was often considered to be one of the most resistant fields of the world. Today, only some seventy years after those bloody and dangerous times, Latin America today is somewhere between 20 and 30% Christian and is seeing a much greater democratic and economic progress. The tyrannies and oppressive poverty has begin to give way to a new and better time.

Liberal political ideas began to spread in the fifties, spearheaded by the communist fervor of those times. While these movements were largely atheist or agnostic, they at least cracked to door open to the freedom to think and believe differently. Once the thoughts and beliefs of the people could no longer be controlled by the threat of death, the very religious peoples of Latin America began to listen to the Gospel. While still risky, one could preach the Gospel and people could listen and accept the message preached. Bible study courses proliferated and were quite popular as people wanted to know what was in the Bible that had cause it to be so restricted for so long. Progress was slow at first as fear still reigned. But soon the tiny trickle of desertions from the Catholic church became a torrent. The remaining milder forms of persecution, such as having their children expelled from school or losing a job also became less and less common. The Second Vatican Council declared that Evangelical Christians were no longer “heretics” to be killed, but “separated brethren” that were to be tolerated. The bloody and brutal Holy Roman Inquisition had finally come to an end. By the 1970’s churches were flourishing and baptisms were counted in the hundreds. Local preachers began to work fervently to spread the Gospel and evangelism was seen as the primary work of the church.

Our churches were, unfortunately slow to see the “fields white unto the harvest” and few missionaries were sent into the region. In Colombia, Warren Sanders entered Colombia in 1964, followed by Mark Stringer in the late sixties. Later Carl Hines would work with him for a period of time. My wife and I left the United States headed for Colombia in 1973, and since then Martin Sanders had returned as have two of Mark Stringer’s children, Andrew Stringer and Sherry Moreland. So only five missionaries are currently working in a country of more than fifty million people! Similar numbers are working in other countries of Latin America. Obviously, our eyes have been focused elsewhere. While our focus was elsewhere, the Lord was working through

others and the Gospel began to spread very rapidly. By the late 1900's the percentages of evangelical Christians in Latin America began to explode and the percentages of the populations that counted themselves as Bible believing Christians could no longer be ignored. Politicians began to take note and cater to them, offering a political voice to the church for the first time. Constitutions were being re-written to guarantee freedom of religion. Colombia wrote a new constitution in 1991 doing just that. Statistics now tell us that somewhere between 19 and 53 percent of the populations is evangelical Christian, depending on the country. In Colombia, where I work, it is now approaching 40% of the population!

Secular social scientists have taken note and studied the phenomena. They have attributed the improved living conditions, the reduction of absolute poverty, and the greater political freedom and respect for human rights to the spread of the Gospel. The conversion numbers are so significant that this has been called "the largest and most significant shift in religious loyalty in the history of the world, with the possible exception of the first century." Unfortunately, our churches have been slow to recognize the opportunities and often reluctant to support sending missionaries to the region. As a result, the Restoration Movement is represented in relatively low numbers in the region. While our message is a perfect fit, as Latin Americans have ignored the stodgy American denominations, the concept of restoring the church of the New Testament has resonated in the region and is seen in numerous indigenous religious movements that claim to be doing just that. We have a unique message and opportunity and we as a people should be actively working with and guiding this massive transformation that is right on our doorsteps!

Open doors and spectacular opportunities still abound in Latin America. While we are obviously late and slow to see the harvest awaiting, we can still offer much and we can still be a voice for the restoration of New Testament Christianity in the region. As a people and a church we need to heed the Lord's calling to lift our eyes unto the harvest and pray that the Lord send laborers from our churches to a region that is still seeing some of the most significant church growth anywhere in the world!