

## Theology In Three Dimensions

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Sometimes I hear Argentine pastors and laymen lament the negative influence of North American culture, especially among evangelicals. I hear complaints about the kind of music that is sung in church (monotonous choruses) and the sentimental spirituality that is taught. I agree.

The thoughtful Latin American theologian, Rene Padilla, for example, grieves the imported “made in the U.S.A.” evangelicalism saturated by the “American way of life.” He calls this the “Great Lie,” meaning consumerism with its focus upon personal success and happiness. I agree.

The respected evangelical historian, Mark Noll, however, focused on another destructive aspect of North American evangelicalism that is also very influential in Latin America: anti-intellectualism and biblical-theological ignorance. The opening sentence of his well known book, The Scandal Of The Evangelical Mind (1994), makes his critique clear: “The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind” (p. 3). He went on to explain rather bluntly:

Fundamentalism, dispensational premillennialism, the Higher Life movement, and Pentecostalism were all evangelical strategies of survival in response to the religious crises of the late nineteenth century. In different ways each preserved something essential of the Christian faith. But together they were a disaster for the life of the mind. (p. 24)

Evangelicals do not, characteristically, look to the intellectual life as an arena in which to glorify God because, at least in [North] America, our history has been pragmatic, populist, charismatic, and technological more than intellectual. (p. 55)

As a result of following a theology that did not provide Christian guidance for the wider intellectual life, there has been, properly speaking, no fundamentalist philosophy, no fundamentalist history of science, no fundamentalist aesthetics, no fundamentalist history, no fundamentalist novels or poetry, no fundamentalist jurisprudence, no fundamentalist literary criticism, and no fundamentalist sociology. (p. 137)

Lamentably, this mindless Christianity is what we have brought you, a Latino world of immense creativity and intelligence. Regarding the issue of anti-intellectualism and its negative impact upon Latin American evangelicalism, therefore, I also agree (and I am North American).

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the *common* good. (1 Cor 12:7)  
To Titus, my true child in a *common* faith. (Titus 1:4)  
...Our *common* salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. (Jude 1:3)

So, let me present a modest proposal for theological development in Argentina (and maybe for all of Latin America). I suggest a theology in three dimensions.

First, theology should be contextual, as Padilla wisely suggests. It must be local, connected to the issues and trends of its social context. It should be done by thinkers immersed in that setting, incorporating resources from that setting, and answering questions and addressing problems that arise out of that setting.

However, local Christian intellectuals must recognize a deficit that Padilla mentioned in his essay, "The Contextualization of the Gospel" (1979): "The church in Latin America is a church with no theological reflection of its own." (He argued recently that the situation has improved, but that more development is needed. Watch the video.) The other challenge Padilla implied is that Latin America must not simply replace North American cultural evangelicalism with Latin American cultural evangelicalism. In the same essay he wrote:

No culture completely fulfills the purpose of God; in all cultures there are some elements unfavorable to the understanding of the gospel. For this reason, the gospel never becomes completely incarnate in any given culture. It always transcends cultures, even cultures that it has deeply affected.

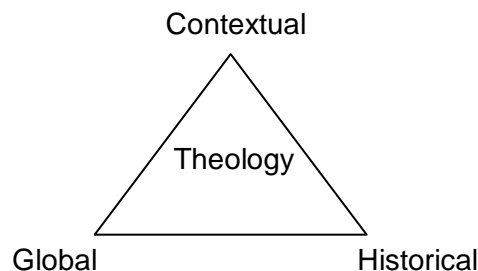
Another weakness to avoid in contextualization is reductionism. Theology that focuses too deeply on one's context and local thinkers, without maintaining the prophetic stance of the Bible that critiques all cultures, often supports the status quo in politics, culture, and worldview. Plus, too much contextual thinking and "thinking from below," can produce deafness to the voices from the past and from around the globe. Theological reflection must incorporate contextual analysis, but cannot be reduced to the context alone.

Second, theology should be global. French, German, Spanish, and English voices (and more) should be heard. People of color should be part of the discussion. Other local contexts have positive and profound contributions to make. Good theology is not only contextual but also listens to others around the world. In fact, perhaps at no time in history has the church had so many gifted leaders of every ethnic group and nation.

Third, theology should be historical. It must be deeply rooted in the scriptures and biblical-theological tradition. At no time in history has the church been blessed with so much excellent scholarship. We should learn from it, especially as a remedy for anti-intellectualism, ignorance, and irrelevance.

We should learn, also, from church history: our creeds, great thinkers, and contested doctrines and practices. How did Abraham Kuyper and Dietrich Bonhoeffer confront the ideologies of their day? How did Pascal and C. S. Lewis communicate the Christian worldview? How did William Wilberforce, the Guinness family, and Martin Luther King alleviate critical social problems? What can we learn from our great thinkers of the past: Augustine, Anselm, Calvin, the Radical Reformers, Comenius, the English Puritans, Wesley, Edwards, and the Niebuhr brothers, for example? Learning from our wiser forefathers grounds our faith and prevents us from repeating foolish mistakes. History teaches us humility and wisdom.

So, this is my humble proposal: Latin American theology in Argentina should be three dimensional. It ought to listen to the context, voices from around the globe, and church history:



Otherwise, Latino theology is subject to distortion and superficiality, leaving it one dimensional only. Fortunately, in this age of efficient communication and travel, and globalization, this agenda is achievable -- if there is a will to do it. I think that Argentina could help lead the way to a biblical-theological renaissance of evangelicalism.

Now, if this proposal is acceptable, the next question is: What infrastructure is required to create a deeper and broader theology in Argentina and, indeed, in all of Latin America?