

# Latin American Baptist Identity, approximations and challenges.

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The moment has come when we must put aside historical narcissism, in other words, denominational abstraction, to see ourselves in the frame of modern Christianity. For too long, a historical inferiority complex has prevailed, and sometimes, the result has been a denominational superiority complex.

Justo C. Anderson

The last decades have been spaces for constant dialogues between several historical denominations unquiet for what is considered the necessary reflection of their identity. This concern among other circles is not considered necessary due to the globalization spirit prevailing in the world.

This tension is looking forward to deal between the need of keep reaffirming in the new generations those pillars that hold that sense of belonging so valid, with the idealism that calling the Christian unity, pretends to be unaware all pertinence and relevance of a search of the own roots.

Latin America lives this dynamics; fruit of a significant numeric growth of believers identified with the evangelical church, where the differentiation is every time more complex to precise, when the measure is established in the function of liturgical practices that in a moment raised up as useful indicators for the distinction, not that today it accomplish that function.

There lies the necessary search of the pillars that will always be the distinctive of a church that responding to its DNA keeps that stamp that characterizes and drives it to the daily walking. This exploration is so challenging when it is about to move what in the surface could confuse or dismiss the true foundation.

This excuse also requires the objectivity of the ones doing this work lift up authentic principles that overcome all courage that responding to a historical or cultural moment in particular, be capable to find the elements that independent from the visible frame, keep a solid background coherent with their identity.

To consider the historical moment is pertinent to an approach that longs to discover what makes a local congregation, a Baptist Church, assuming the challenge always up to date, context, culture, enriched with a biblical and theological interaction capable to answer these and other demands that cannot be just dismiss.

## **A retrospective vision**

The task to precise a group, ethnic, or social conglomerate identity could be a complex work or not so difficult in the measure of the tools needed like serious studies that allow an approximation to the topic with proved bases and not only absurd speculations.

In this sense the riches of our denomination relies on the professionals in history who count with academic formation and enjoy respect for their credibility, they reconstructed those vital elements to conform an identity that establishes clear distinctive parameters.

Justo C. Anderson, in his book *La historia de los Bautistas* [The history of the Baptists], systematizes what is distinctive like the seven fundamental principles that hold our comprehension of being believers and church members. These principles leave an inerasable mark to consider for those who come in search of identity.

The Christological, Biblical, Ecclesiological, Sociological, Spiritual, Political, Evangelistic principle constitutes the footprint that the Baptist believers who conformed the first congregations put as foundation in the reflexive exercise of a living faith and these are the pillars on which all the interaction as churches are lifted up.

The loyalty of the historical Gospel and the freedom in its expression – consistency and flexibility – are the most remarkable characteristics of the Baptist testimony. They adapt perfectly well to the space age, that wants security and, at the same time, freedom. It is an age that needs to be founded in the revelation of God, but the same way, to get used to the new forms of a cybernetic age.<sup>1</sup>

This thought cannot stay in the static past, must have the capacity to generate dialogue and answers to a society that keeps presenting its agonies and questionings to the Christian faith who most of the times cries onto the historical to be hooked up and not be challenged to get back that urgency sense that distinguished the antecessors.

In that sense, the need of a leadership capable to be tuned with the requirements that will show up will be always determinant so the historical process continues maintaining the riches nurtured by a presence where the word and the action be the main axis over which a clear identity may continuously built.

### **A needed mentoring**

The presence of the Baptist in this part of the Continent is registered back in the XIX century, where the diverse missions societies from, mainly, United States of America, England, and Canada, start to send couples with the objective of beginning a work of church planting, in what was considered a white field [mission field].

Rapidly this presence gained a boom in the middle of deep needs, where the education, health, family economy, micro business efforts, were the linking tonic of a denomination that was willing to establish in this part of the world, with a message of hope that required practical expressions and not mere words.

This local situation was better understood by Baptist missions organizations that, because of their historical and theological background, established support links in the fields where the urgency was imminent, leaving a legacy that later generations could enjoy as own resources.

A great part of countries were blessed with the human talent that came in the figure of the Baptist missionaries, educators, medical doctors, nurses, theologians, pastors, who were easy to identify a so marked vocation that was contagious to those few nationals who in that first moment were part of a movement that was fighting to lift up native roots.

The figure of the missionary was determinant in the construction of a Baptist identity, becoming the prototype to follow, and since then some differences were showing up, hooked in the cultural background and theological foundations, those vital aspects that with the years coming will be deepened between the Baptists in the Continent.

The hegemony was possible in the measure that the missionaries responded to the common pattern, when the mission societies or Baptist missions boards from the conventions with foreign work were diverse in a same country, the differences were becoming evident between the axis that handled.

The fact is that far from affecting the expansion, it showed the invaluable richness of the Baptists, their diversity, that something founded in their exercise of faith acknowledging the function of priest before God. They made a choice, responsibly and with freedom of conscience, within their interpretative framework of the Scriptures.

### **A challenging growth**

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<sup>1</sup> Justo C. Anderson. Historia de los Bautistas [History of the Baptists]. Tomo I. Casa Bautista de Publicaciones. El Paso, Texas, 1978. Pp113.

The hegemony almost absolute of the Roman Catholic church at the beginning of the XX century will suffer its major strike in our continent, fruit of the political movements happening in most of the countries, where the consecution of a lay state, established a new framework for the expressions of diverse faiths.

In this period of time where many historians manifest that the identity of evangelical groups, and particularly the Baptists, are established, due to a stronger participation of the national component capable of keep replicating with the ease of their own language the transforming message of the Gospel.

This growth was not similar in the countries, and Brazil was a phenomenon, where the parameters before established were broken, reaching a number developing around the 600% between 1911 to 1938, motivated by a series of factors very particular where the incidence of the Gospel responded to a spiritual and social demand of the habitants.

This aspect in less numbers was happening in other countries, where the need of training this local contingent became the most important challenge to a conglomerate of missionaries who grew to assume another role inside the conformation of the first organizations that started to have a bigger shape.

The leadership formation will become the consideration axis to growth preservation that in many cases exceeded the expectations but in other circumstances was showing the little assimilation of the reality, staying just a transcultural religious movement, with no flavor on its own.

In my lecture, that was one the missing links that affected a more harmonic aspect among the countries, making evidence of that intuitive capacity that some missionaries had in difference with others to be generating a process where the formation and the companionship to the national was forming a solid mechanism to avoid a sick dependence that will not permit the required maturity.

It is there where the identity incorporates elements that not being gravitate in this aspect were giving shape to the thought, action, and reflection of whom were looking to preserve a model not in the biblical – theological principles that were actually shared, did not influenced as much as the figure of the receiver, faithful, unequivocal, wise, and fair, qualities that in the mind of many Latin-American Baptists end up idealizing the figure of the American missionaries, in its majority.

A period where the numeric growth did not meant necessarily organizational advance, showing that financial, organizational, theological dependence was impeding the enriching of the identity with the own elements of the Latin-American culture and reality.

### **A reality that cannot be ignored**

Our Continent situation has substantially changed provoking a belonging sense that was so weak for so much time; these roots' reencounter spirit is not far to the faith reality, where this dimension is willing to approve the experience beyond an inherited understanding, acknowledging the need to question the once mainly accepted facts.

To talk about one single Baptist identity in the Latin-American Continent is complex; it is possible that for several decades the foreign missionaries leadership tinged a comprehension of what means to be a Baptist, focusing elements so visuals that the transcendental, incidental, being there did not have the same impact.

This identity in some cases created culture; one that for so much time darkened or disappeared the own when considered it a threat against the professing faith. This generated an anachronism so severe that united to this so own pietism of the majority of the missions' organizations that came to our Continent, were forming a radical separation from the context and situation that was the influence target, having minimum contact only to evangelize and no more.

The Latin-American Protestantism is marked by that evangelical – puritan– pietistic character of the world evangelical Christianity which historical roots are found in the pietistic movement of the XVI and XVII centuries in England, and the great revival of the XVIII century in the United States. The pietism itself represented a very important attempt

to reform the protestant heritage, and its influence has left a distinctive impression in the Latin-American Christianity<sup>2</sup>

The turning point developed by the International Missions Board of the Southern Baptist at the end of the 80's decade and beginnings of 90's redounded in a crisis, and when the years came by, I dare to point out it resulted as positive to most of the countries, because it pushed to an own construction of its ministry and task understanding, where starting with an undeniable model, it was contrasting evangelical and cultural elements.

This process joined a movement that was happening in all the Continent among the other denominations and free churches or independent ones, where the so called Latin-Americanization of the Protestantism was happening since the 70's decade, gaining strength and relevance in the two decades after.

From the leadership to the organizational structures, going through the services and diffusion methods, the evangelical Protestantism of the Continent has assumed its own flavor every time more adjusted to the cultural local patterns of each region or country in Latin-American.<sup>3</sup>

The yearning catches those who remember nostalgically the years when the missionaries guided, sang, played the piano, resolved the problems, bought lands, a time when being Baptist was a series of liturgical practices that many saw in danger when the so called Pentecostalization or Charismatization of the historical churches strongly penetrated, affecting what for many is the authentic Baptist identity.

### **A face in constant construction**

The past has its richness, indisputable, unquestionable, ready to illuminate those great dilemmas and controversies that every age will have, incorporating to dialogue those elements that will always be important to show the postulate that are required to present in front of a world in constant change.

I accept as undeniable the Baptist heritage that through the biblical principles we hold in the denomination, historically have served to support features of a common identity, ready to be manifested when the centrality of each one of these faith pillars of ours be threatened or require to be proclaimed as prophetic word once more.

The challenge is provoked when that common identity pretends to ignore the particular features, own, necessities, so that Gospel be pertinent to a time and moment where the freedom message of Jesus and His kingdom bring the elements that since the beginning were integrated to an experience faithful to its ethnical and cultural roots.

From that optic there are aspects that are and will continue being in construction relating to that identity, where the Latin-American flavor is not lost when is time to deal with hope tuned with salsa, merengue, tango, cueca or zamba, the great inequalities of a Continent rich in natural resources, recognized as the world's natural reserve due to the great extensions of cultivating lands, but at the same time bleeding corruption, violence, injustice, where surviving is the only challenge that many people have in the great cities.

It is possible that many still wonder if it is valid to respond to the question that is looking for an answer of what is the implication of being Baptist in our Continent, polarized for two or more positions in which the lack of trust, qualification, and a constant suspicious do not let us enjoy the blessing of being members of the people of God, invested in His grace, willing to proclaim and demonstrate the Gospel of the Kingdom, with no limits or fear.

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<sup>2</sup> Deiros, Pablo A., *Historia del Cristianismo en América Latina [Latin-American Christianity History]*. Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana [Latin-American Theological Fraternity]. Buenos Aires, Argentina. 1992. Primera Edición. Pp 789.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pp 794.

Being Baptist today is being Baptist as those who came before us, people free from denominational boundaries, people who had the freedom to think and look for concrete answers to the problems of the society in the light of the Bible. Being Baptist is to think only under the direction of the Bible reading that opens a dialogue with life itself, to live and to teach only in the centrality of Jesus Christ, to live and to teach every believer to be a priest. In other words, being Baptist is to fight because the Gospel once given to the saints become flesh in every person and that way to be instruments of God to the people who are loosing hope.<sup>4</sup>

The Latin-American Baptist identity, far from being lost, has gained dynamics, adding a reflection – action exercise, where the dynamics of being church keeps cheering many congregations to replant their commitment with the community, a commitment that implies to listen, to observe, accompany, where the stand of self-sufficiency or superiority is put aside, acknowledging that our own interaction with those in the streets should be equal to equal.

A biblical face, where the Scripture is not lost, in a centrality that assumes Jesus as Lord and non-negotiable model of ministry, acting for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the humble, where the rejected are welcomed and integrated, the children seen as sign and signal of the Kingdom, the women creation of God with equal rights and responsibilities.

A human face, multiform, receiver of a Baptist heritage where the diversity has never been an inconvenient, instead, always assumed as fortress that enriches and support growth, assuming the situation of being a diverse Continent where Indians, mixed races, immigrants, white, and black accept their responsibility of answering to the faith that has been given with the certainty that our missions fields are the streets, the neighborhoods, the countries, where injustice and inequality invite us not to be neutral, but take a radical position as Jesus did in favor of the most needed.

A modern face, that in some cases do not want a badge, name, denominational distinctive, nor because of shame nor to dismiss the heritage, even their theology and practice is Baptist with no doubt, appealing to a certain situation in the time we live, where the known post-modernism has leaked what in its moment characterized the big churches and the historical movements, the Baptists among them.

We perceive that protestant Christianity, in its actual version, has a not typical constitution about the historical continuity of the protestant tradition. It is a Christianity that seems to be brought –and keeps coming– by different railroads apart from what the Protestantism used until the late XX century. We can also think that this Christianity is connected to the generation of the last thirty years and have nothing to do with the Protestantism of the *sola gratia, sola Scriptura*, and the justification only by faith alone. That is why the preservation of the faith in that style does not mean to maintain faith in its pure doctrine as has been traditionally understood.<sup>5</sup>

A sensitive face, capable of getting passionately involved in everything that implies the fight for the diverse causes, where the life in all its expressions be immersed, showing a commitment that do not dismiss what keeps the creator heart, the man, the nature, the whole creation alive.

An inter-confessional face, ready to stand in every effort that has the goal of making the kingdom of God and His justice visible, far from all kind of sectaries that eludes its responsibility in here & now that cannot wait. In that sense we are called to participate in every dialogue and effort with the same goal, with no fear to be judged by those who do not admit any contact with other faith expressions.

This construction evidence what we are as Latin-American Baptist people, where the paradigms from the past must admit a real time, ready to acknowledge the contribution of those who crossed frontiers, willing to recognize themselves as protagonists and not mere spectators.

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<sup>4</sup> Juan Carlos Cevallos. The Baptists and their message, a speech. Ecuadorean Baptist Convention. Quito, Ecuador. 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Arturo Piedra, Sidney Rooy, H. Fernando Bullon. Where does the protestantism goes; Heritage and perspectives in Latin America. Latin-American Theological Fraternity. Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2003. Pp 51

A fully Baptist, pastor, teacher and theologian, Dr. J. L. Garret commented prophetically in the 70's what in our Continent we can light up:

The great army of young people who will enter our churches after 1970 believe that Christian unity is more important than the denominational differences. We cannot assume that our mentality of the past will be the one of the future.<sup>6</sup>

These brief approximations do not pretend to cover all the richness of an identity that still keeps, in my lecture, in a dynamic and constant construction, product of a young Continent, ready to keep looking answers to the needs that far from being met, still demand attention among those who with a known richness as the Baptists dare to walk with the people, feeling and looking themselves as one of them.

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<sup>6</sup> Glen Hinson. Southern Baptist and Ecumenism, Review and Exposition. LXVI, 3, Summer, 1969, pp 287