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Daniel serves with *Latin America Mission*, most recently as a faculty member at the *Bible Institute of Asuncion in Paraguay*. Daniel also travels throughout Latin America leading courses, seminars and workshops and has authored dozens of articles, book reviews and book chapters.

In 2009, he published his first book, *Latin American Evangelical Theology in the 1970s: The Golden Decade*. He is currently researching a textbook that traces the theological developments in Latin America in the last century.

SCHOLARLEADERS INTERNATIONAL had the privilege of supporting Daniel during his studies in historical theology at *Trinity Evangelical Divinity School* where he completed his PhD in 2004. Daniel and his wife, Gayna have a son named Jonathan and are adopting a girl named Maida. In 2001, they lost their seven year old daughter, Karis, to cerebral palsy.

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DISTURBING OBSERVATIONS FROM LATIN AMERICA
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SCHOLARLEADER
INSIGHTS

After a year of unemployment, accumulated unmet needs and multiple wants, Julia (not her real name) decided to go to the pastor for spiritual assistance. Her situation was too burdensome and painful to face alone. Surely, she thought, the pastor's prayers will get the Lord's attention. The secretary typed her name in the computer and without blinking an eye, told Julia that she was behind in her tithing and the pastor only met with those who were up to date. If she pays her back tithes she may come again to see him.

Comical? Farfetched? No, a real story.

The most recent ecclesiastical models in Latin America propose a church as a company with a successful and charismatic CEO (pastor) whose main goal is to increase profits and assets (tithes, offerings, radio and television stations, buildings) by enticing more customers (members) to buy its product (message). In this model, the strategy to market religious services relies on superlatives and the message is secondary. Mega-congregations with this approach have popped up all over Latin America, giving the impression that evangelicals are experiencing amazing growth. But is the biblical Gospel being preached? It makes you wonder.

Shallow religious fervor

Undoubtedly religion is growing. The number of people going to church is increasing but this is true for all kinds of religious offers. Religion is part of the culture in most of Latin America. People go to church not necessarily because they understand the message or because they have a relationship with the Lord. Many go to church because it is the 'thing to do' on Sundays. They feel the need to fulfill a ritual and obligation to guarantee divine favor the rest of the week. For some it does not matter what type of church helps with that 'religious duty'.

Researchers have found that many people participate simultaneously in various sorts of religious traditions according to their current need, as heard in the voice of a woman from Brazil:

"In the end, I say that all religions are good for you, but there is a time for each one. For people who do not have any problems in life, the best is

Catholicism, you get closer to the saints, you go to church whenever you want and nobody bothers you. For a person going through financial difficulties, the best religion is that of the Pentecostals because they help you as brethren; the only problem is you cannot drink, smoke, dance or anything else like that. Now, for those suffering headaches the best religion is that of the spiritists; it is very demanding, you cannot miss one single session, but it really cures you. Then, as soon as I am completely healed, if God allows me, I will go back to Catholicism."

This lady might be counted as an evangelical for statistical purposes. Evang-elastic figures are the norm to give the impression that we are doing well in Latin America, but reality shows otherwise. Countries with supposedly high percentages of evangelicals are the ones with more violence and social problems. Studies have shown that many people leave the church and more youth are dropping their faith than ever before.

Faith-filled and faithful leaders

There are wonderful examples of pastors who go against the modern flow, but many of them feel pressure to follow the corporate model. Recently a pastor shared with me that many people from his church were being lured by the spectacular 'signs and wonders' of a nearby mega-church, and they advised him to follow suit if he wanted to keep his flock. Another pastor, well known for his Biblical preaching, was asked to add a few things about 'health and wealth' to his sermons if he wanted to see growth in his congregation. Orthodoxy is being redefined pragmatically in response to the new ecclesiastical models.

Those who continue faithfully without emphasizing immediate 'health and wealth' are often found in small towns, rural areas, and slums around the cities. Most of the pastors are bi-vocational because their congregations cannot afford salaries. They labor all day and serve their people on evenings and weekends. Few of these servants have formal training in pastoral duties and theology. There is a enormous need to provide them with affordable theological education.

Three things leaders must remember

All this begs questions regarding the kind of leadership needed in Latin America, leadership that will resist pressure from the latest ecclesiastical fashion. Let me mention three priorities: First, pastors and other church leaders need to remember that they are servants both of the Lord and his people. Megalomaniac leaders should not have a place in the church. Christian life is not about following them but about following Jesus. This seems to be straightforward but experience shows otherwise. When a leader becomes the center of attention and demands that 'his flock' regard him as indispensable, we get a twisted version of the Gospel. On the contrary, those who lead people to Jesus and empower them to live for Him are a real asset to the church. We need to remember that the throne is already taken by the Lamb.

Second, leaders need to remember that there is only one infallible word: the Bible. All other words, regardless of who speaks them, are not to be equated with God's Word. We need leaders who give the Bible the centrality it has lost in many churches. In Latin America the people of God need to re-encounter the Scriptures and their pastors are the ones who should lead them to do so. Everyone, even the pastor needs to submit to biblical authority. It is the Word of God that has the power to change lives, and it is heartbreaking when the Scriptures are replaced by opinions. The biblical model is not a church centered on a leader, but leaders and congregation together centered on the Word.

Finally, Latin American churches need leaders who preach even the unpopular aspects of the Gospel, like true repentance, change of lifestyle, radical discipleship and meaningful social involvement. We need to rediscover the real message of Scripture that calls us to become, by God's grace, instruments of reconciliation and change in the Lord's hands.

The incomplete message of today's preachers in Latin America too often does not reflect the richness of the whole Gospel. And that is a tragedy!

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