

*Commonality and
Diversity among
Hispanics in the United
States and their
Implications for
Evangelism*

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Theology and Practice of Evangelism
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Commonality and Diversity among Hispanics in the United States and their Implications for Evangelism

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 1995 report on population projections, growth of the Hispanic population is predicted to be a major element of the total population growth in the United States for the next fifty years. They predicted that according to the current trend, the Hispanic population would contribute 37% of the nation's population growth from 1995 to 2000, 44% from 2000 to 2020, and 62% from 2020 to 2050.¹ At the present there are around 30 million Hispanics living in the United States making up just under 12% of the population.² It is conservatively estimated that by the year 2010 Hispanics will be the largest minority in United States and that by the year 2050 they could make up to 25% the population. The Caucasian population, on the other hand, is predicted to drop from around 75% of the population in 1990 to 50% in 2050.³

This "browning of America" will probably not only have a strong influence on American culture and society, but also on our very own church body. With this increase of Hispanics in the United States comes more and new opportunities from our Lord to share his precious gospel. It could be said tongue-in-cheek that the fields are no longer as white, but the harvest is still waiting.

What impact will Hispanic Americans have on the WELS? What implications will they have on our evangelism outreach? This paper will discuss the commonality and diversity found among Hispanics living in the United States and their implications for

¹ "Current Population Reports: Population Projections of the United States by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1995-2050," U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, Bureau of the Census: 15.

² Ibid. 17.

³ Ibid. 15.

evangelism. The thoughts of this essay are based upon the experience of the few WELS men working in Hispanic outreach in the United States,⁴ the author's own personal observations from his limited experience both in Mexico and among Hispanics on the south side of Milwaukee, and from various literature about the Hispanic culture.

Commonality among all people

When discussing evangelism across cultures, it is valuable to look at that which is common to all human beings: sin, grace, and the Means of Grace.

Sin

Since all mankind can trace its roots back to Adam and Eve, all mankind also falls under the same curse. From the moment of conception we are sinful, as David confessed in Psalm 51:5 *Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.* There is not one person on earth who has not acted upon this sinful nature and sinned against God's perfect law. The Apostle Paul writes that *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:23). God makes very clear the tragic result of this sin. Romans 6:23 tells us that *the wages of sin is death.* As a result of sin, every person on earth is subject to physical death. Despite the wonders of modern medicine, plastic surgery, exercise, and good nutrition, we all will die some day. But that is not all. Due to sin, all people are dead spiritually, enemies of God, and able to do nothing good on their own. Paul wrote to the Ephesian congregation: *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins* (2:1). The most tragic result of sin, however, is that all people are condemned to die eternally. All people, from every race—Black, White, Hispanic, or Asian—are guilty of sin and condemned to an eternity in hell.

⁴ A written interview was sent out to all Pastors serving in Hispanic Outreach in the United States.

Grace

God, however, in his grace *wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth* (I Timothy 2:4). To bring about this salvation, God sent his own dear Son, Jesus Christ, to be the substitute for all people. Jesus lived a perfect life in mankind's place and suffered mankind's death on the cross. Paul writes in II Corinthians 5:21, *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*. With Christ's innocent death on the cross, all people are justified, i.e., declared righteous before God. As was seen in Romans 3:23, all have sinned, but Paul continues in verse 24 by telling us that all *are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ*. There is not one sin, not one sinner, that does not fall under this redemption won by Jesus.

The Means of Grace

This justification won for all by Christ is received by the sinner through God's gift of faith. The Holy Spirit works faith through the Means of Grace, i.e., the gospel in Word and Sacrament. Paul wrote to the Romans that *faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ* (10:17). The gospel in Word and Sacrament is God's chosen means to work faith in people's hearts. Apart from this gospel no one can believe. Paul wrote: *How can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?* (Romans 10:14).

This gospel from God is powerful. Romans 1:16 says: *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes*.

Nothing can be added to the gospel to improve it. The messenger is merely a proclaimer

of God's message. Paul wrote: *We have this treasure (i.e., the gospel) in jars of clay (i.e., the messenger who because of sin is weak and fragile) to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us (II Corinthians 4:7).*

Implications

The implications of these commonalities for cross-cultural outreach are rather obvious. All people, no matter what their cultural background, are condemned sinners loved by God. Christ died for their sins. What they need is God's saving message, which is the gospel. The Holy Spirit working through this gospel is the only thing that can bring them to faith. All outreach must be firmly founded on this truth. The only thing that can change a man's heart is the gospel.

As Christ's messengers, however, we want to proclaim the truth of the gospel clearly so that it is understood by all. We want to tear down any barrier that stands in the way of a person hearing this powerful message. Therefore it is important not only to know what is common to all people, but also what is common to specific groups of people. For when we understand a culture, we are better equipped to proclaim clearly the good news of salvation to the *individual sinner* of that culture. We also will then begin to understand the barriers that may prevent the gospel from being heard. The rest of this paper will discuss the commonality and diversity that exists specifically among Hispanics in the United States.

Commonality among Hispanics in the United States

When you think of Hispanic food what comes to mind? Chichi's? Taco Bell? Maybe jalapeño peppers? If you were to talk to a Puerto Rican, a Cuban, or a South American, they would tell you that they don't eat tacos or jalapeño peppers. The truth is

that tacos and hot salsa (the dip and not the dance) are really specific only to Mexico. The food in the rest of Latin America is quite different. We here in the United States often tend to view all Hispanics as Mexican. This misconception can seem condescending to a non-Mexican and even create barriers for the gospel. It is important that when working among Hispanics in the United States, one have at least a basic understanding of the commonality and diversity among the various Hispanic groups. We will first discuss three commonalities.

Relationships

Whereas much of what is considered the "American Spirit" is based on individuality, the Hispanic culture is based on the collective, on their relationships:

The primary expression of this sense of collectivity is in the family. Even after many years in this country, the Hispanic retains a strong, multi-layered family structure, including not only the immediate parental family but also other relatives as part of an enlarged unit. Nor are these primary social links limited to blood relatives.⁵

To be heard by the average Hispanic there must exist *confianza*. *Confianza* literally translated is "trust," but for a Hispanic this carries a lot more weight than for the average Anglo-American. Most Hispanic groups place a high importance on respect and cordiality. So they will seldom treat you rudely when speaking with them at the doorstep or on the street. This however does not mean that one has attained *confianza*. The desire not to offend often goes so far that they may tell you what they think you want to hear, even if it isn't the truth. It is better to lie than to hurt someone's feelings. The common illustration for this is asking directions. One must always be careful when asking for

⁵ Lucas, Isidro. The Browning of America: The Hispanic Revolution in the American Church. Chicago: Fides/Claretian, 1981: 59.

directions, for a Hispanic will many times give you directions even if they don't know how to get there.

To attain true *confianza*, a relationship must be established where you are no longer seen as someone trying to convert them, but rather a person who cares about them and has a respect for their culture. Esaúl and Melissa Salomón write in regards to the Mexican culture:

The person who wants to reach out to the Mexican with the Gospel must first build that relationship "face to face." This relationship may be conceived in a relatively short time or it may take a long time. Usually, however, the length of time is not the determining factor. The cultural connection that needs to take place is much more important. There is an identification and trust that is underlying this dynamic of relationship building.⁶

The dilemma exists that without this *confianza*, a messenger of the gospel can seem intrusive. "Crossing the boundary of friendliness too soon or without cultural permission is thought to be disrespectful and an intrusive outsider can be politely but clearly rejected." This attitude can be seen to varying degrees among most Hispanics.

Implications for evangelism

Esaúl Salomón asserts that according to his experience, one of the most effective ways of reaching out to the Hispanic community is through the family. He would work through existing members, conducting Bible classes in the member's homes with extended family and friends:

Such evangelism done within the home, specifically in the context of extended families, is, in fact, a model which can still be successfully applied today—certainly in Hispanic contexts. The basic reason is that the cultural mores common to all Hispanics attach particular significance to the home in identifying the extended "family." The home is that private domain which only those may enter who have established

⁶ Salomón, Esaúl and Melissa. Harvest Waiting: Reaching Out to Mexicans. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995: 25.

relationships of blood or trust. Relationships of trust are cultivated by direct and personal interaction.⁷

Events in the church that center around the family such as weddings, baptisms, and *quinciñeras*⁸ can also be very effective ways to share with the extended family the truth of God's Word.

From the author's limited experience, both in Mexico and on the south side of Milwaukee, these seem to be effective methods of reaching out to the Hispanics. A mere invitation to a church service or Bible study in the church do not seem to yield many results. A bond of trust must first be established.

Spirituality

American society has in recent years showed a renewed interest in the spiritual world. Movies, books, and television shows about angels are the latest craze. Many Americans, however, still tend to be rather skeptical of the supernatural. Science is still held in high regard, even though it may not be thought of as the answer to all of life's questions. The Hispanic culture tends to be even more "aware" of the spiritual world. As a result of native pagan religions and Catholic mysticism, the Hispanic is very aware that spirits exist and that not everything can be explained by science. This can be seen in the prevalence of *magia negra* (black magic), *curanderos* (spirit healers), and Mariolatry in Latin America.

Isidro Lucas, in his book The Browning of America, writes that as of 1980 about 85% of all Hispanics in the United States consider themselves Roman Catholic.⁹ This

⁷ Salomón, Esaúl, "Biblical Evangelism in Hispanic Ministry," Concordia Theological Quarterly Vol. 58, No. 2-3 (April-July 1994): 120.

⁸ A *quinciñera* is a special service for a young woman's 15th birthday. It marks her first steps into womanhood and her dedication to her Lord as an adult. This celebration is often as big, if not bigger, than Anglo weddings.

⁹ Lucas, Isidro, op. cit. 15.

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seems to imply that there is no room for evangelism among Hispanics. This number, however, can be very deceiving. Although they consider themselves religious, many Hispanics have little connection to the church or to God's Word. "Hispanics can...be said to be religious, but at the same time unchurched."¹⁰ Mystic rituals and religious experience apart from God's Word and the church many times are the basis of their faith.

Lucas writes:

For Hispanics, religion is a personal thing: the institutional church does not necessarily relate to their religious experience. Being a Catholic is a set of beliefs, rituals, relationships, and even behaviors. But it does not necessarily include full participation in an organized church, with structures, authority, and obligations.¹¹

Implications for evangelism

This "spirituality" of the Hispanic culture can be a real blessing in that it does not deny the existence of God. Due to the strong Catholic influence on the culture and the individual, the Bible is still considered by most Hispanics to be God's Word. The majority, however, have no idea what it says. The evangelist will therefore want to slowly demonstrate what the Bible actually says. A problem that arises with many former Catholics is that they have been told by their priests that the "evangelicals"¹² use a different, poorer translation of the Bible. Many Hispanic households, however, will have a Bible somewhere in the house, though they may never open it. The evangelist can therefore suggest using the family Bible in his gospel presentation.

One must be careful also to not to deny the reality of the spirit world. Many Hispanics will tell you that they or at least somebody they know have experienced a vision of Mary or spirit healing. To deny this fact or discuss immediately the issue of

¹⁰ Ibid. 56.

Mariolatry will often cause them to tune you out. One will always want to turn the discussion first to Jesus, not denying the fact that supernatural forces exist. After establishing the fact the Jesus is their Savior, one can then demonstrate from Second Thessalonians chapter two that the devil and his angels have power in this world to fool people with signs and wonders. Through his Word, God helps us see the devil's lies. He promises to protect us with his power. This approach will also serve to encourage the Hispanic prospect to continue in God's Word.

Language

This category serves well as a transition between commonality and diversity, because it really is both. The Spanish language obviously is a feature common to most immigrants coming from Latin America (with the exception of Brazil and a few small islands and countries). There are, however, many dialects that come from these different countries. Dialects also develop in the United States due to a mixing of Spanish and English.

Implications for evangelism

The discussion of whether Hispanic immigrants should be forced to learn English is hotly discussed in our country. Should the same discussion occur in the church? Should we tell the Hispanic that he must learn English in order to be a part of our church body? The answer is obviously no. It is very easy, however, to let our personal political views influence how we treat prospects for the church. Our job is not to bring people in line with our Anglo-American culture, but rather bring souls into God's family.

¹¹ Ibid. 55.

¹² What all Protestants (including Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses) are usually called.

The ability to speak Spanish does play an important role in reaching out to the Hispanic in the United States:

Studies indicate that the Spanish language is still very strong among the more than 22 million Hispanics living in this country...In Los Angeles county, for example, the Strategy Research Corporation, using the same population sample used by the U.S. Bureau of the Census for a 1989 study, found that the use of the Spanish language had increased from 68 percent in 1984 to 72 percent in 1989. Further, they reported that 97 percent of Hispanics learned Spanish as their first language. The study indicates that nationally, *nine out of ten Hispanics feel more comfortable speaking Spanish than English.* (Emphasis retained)¹³

The need for Spanish language skills in outreach does diminish somewhat among second and third generation Hispanics who speak English well, and often better than Spanish.

An understanding of the language, however, is still useful in that it gives insights into the culture and the way one communicates. The importance and feasibility of learning Spanish varies from place to place. Remember, the goal is to communicate the gospel as clearly as possible.

Diversity among Hispanics in the United States

This section will seek to demonstrate specific areas of diversity that exist between Hispanic groups in the United States. This list is by no means exhaustive, but hopefully it will serve to show that all Hispanic work in the United States is not the same. The evangelist will want to seek to understand the diversity that exists between the Hispanics that he is called to serve and the Hispanics in other parts of the United States. He will also want to be aware of the diversity that may exist within his own group.

Ethnic

¹³ Salomón, Esaúl and Melissa. Harvest Waiting, op. cit. 15.

According to Esaúl Salomón, as of 1990, 13.5 million of all Hispanics in the United States are of Mexican descent.¹⁴ There are also about 2.5 million Puerto Ricans in the United States.¹⁵ Large groups also exist from Cuba and the Dominican Republic. All the other countries of Latin America are also represented to a lesser extent.

The cultures of these different Hispanic groups share many of the commonalities that are mentioned above. They however also demonstrate much diversity. The Puerto Rican will view life in the United States differently than a Mexican due to the fact that he is by birth a U.S. citizen with many rights and privileges under the law. The Mexican-born Hispanic has to struggle with immigration and/or will cross illegally.

Other factors of diversity are food, music, view of government and institutions, to name just a few. To make the mistake and say that Hispanics share the same language and therefore the same culture would be comparable to saying that the American culture is relatively the same as the Australian or English culture.

Geographic and Economic

Pastor Carlos Leyrer at this time is beginning Hispanic outreach in Miami, Florida. Through ethnographic surveys he has discovered that the majority of his target group are upper middle class Cuban Americans. The overall impression was given that they are content with life because they have "made it" financially. This can be contrasted with the Hispanics on the south side Milwaukee who are predominantly lower class Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. These Hispanics see the gangs and violence around them. Life is a daily struggle. The future is not as important to them. This can then be

¹⁴ Ibid. 5.

¹⁵ Chang-Rodríguez, Eugenio. Latinoamérica: su civilización y su cultura. Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers, 1991: 411.

contrasted with Pastor Karl Walther in Watertown, Wisconsin, who is reaching out to recent immigrants from Mexico, who find themselves in a Midwestern small town.

Hispanics in urban centers demonstrate a mixing of the inner city culture with the Hispanic culture. Many Hispanic families in the Southwest may be able to trace their ancestry in the United States back much farther than most Anglo-Americans. The fact is that one's location and economic standing have a profound influence on his outlook on life.

Generations

The diversity between the different generations of Hispanics in the United States is very similar to many other immigrating ethnic groups in the United States. The first generation immigrant will retain much of the language and culture of his homeland. The second and third generation tend to slowly shift to English and the American culture in an effort to fit in.

From the author's limited experience in Mexico and in Milwaukee, many first generation Mexican immigrants consider their stay in this country as temporary. They are here to earn money and then go back to Mexico where they feel more comfortable. Second and third generation Hispanic Americans have stronger ties to the U.S. and they would struggle to live in their parents' homeland.

Religious Background

As was noted above, the overwhelming majority of this nation's Hispanics come from a Catholic background. On the other hand, J. Herbert Kane, in his book Wanted: World Christians, states that the number of Protestants in Latin America is growing by

about 10% each year.¹⁶ Of the Protestants in Latin America one out of every four is Pentecostal.¹⁷ Pentecostalism is by far the fastest growing denomination in Latin America. Cults such as the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses have also taken hold among Hispanics.

One must be aware that many Hispanics have gone through a spiritual journey from Catholicism to either Pentecostalism or one of the cults. They may be frustrated with the Catholic Church or burnt out by Pentecostalism. They may firmly trust in the Virgin Mary for their salvation. They may be disillusioned by all religion. In order to effectively communicate the gospel, the evangelist will need to understand where the individual is coming from.

Conclusion

The Hispanic community in the United States provides a large, culturally diverse mission field. The challenge for the evangelist is to seek to understand the commonality and diversity that exists between various Hispanic groups in order to clearly communicate the gospel and to tear down as many barriers as possible. Esaúl Salomón writes in the Concordia Theological Quarterly:

When ministering to a Hispanic community which includes people from different Latin American countries it is necessary to emphasize the points of commonality while seeing the differences as contributing factors to the life of the community.¹⁸

In order to do this the evangelist will want to read about the Hispanic culture. He will want to talk to missionaries and pastors that have experience in this area. Most importantly, as Missionary Roger Sprain often says, "You gotta know your people." This

¹⁶ Kane, J. Herbert. Wanted World Christians. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986: 25.

¹⁷ Salomón, Esaúl. Harvest Waiting, op. cit. 23.

¹⁸ Salomón, Esaúl, "Biblical Evangelism in Hispanic Ministry," op. cit. 130.

comes from talking to them, living among them, and building bonds of trust. A good method for doing so may be to use the ethnographic surveys that Pastor Allen Sorum has written specifically for cross cultural outreach.¹⁹ Whatever method the evangelist uses, he will want to continually strive to communicate the precious message of the gospel clearly to the glory God and for the salvation of all those who believe it.

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¹⁹ Sorum, E. Allen. Change: Mission and Ministry across Cultures. Milwaukee: WELS Outreach Resources, 1997.

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