

Contextualization of Mission: A Missiological Analysis of Short-Term Missions

Marcos Arroyo Bahamonde

Introduction

In the last seven years, as pastor of a local congregation in the city of Cerro de Pasco, Peru, I have coordinated short-term mission groups that included Christians from France, Sweden, England, and North America.

The present work is an analysis from the perspective of Latin American missiology with an emphasis on the local

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church as promoter of mission. This reflection is the result of a missiological upbringing within the heart of a congregation that passionately lives its work of establishing missionary churches within and outside of Peru with the purpose of sending missionaries to all nations, of a theological and missiological training with Latino ways of expression and language, and of contact with groups of people from overseas foreign to our Peruvian culture and language.

The Contextualization of Mission

The history of missions is the history of the missionary practice of the church in relation to its own missionary nature, how it has assumed its role of being commissioned and sent into the world with the message of the gospel, how it has perceived the past, and how it interprets the present and focuses on the eschatological future that has its maximum expression in Christ's second coming and the restoration of all things, including ethnic groups and cultures. It is the dynamics of the *Missio Dei* (God as owner of mission) and the *Missio Ecclesiae* (the missionary practice of the community of faith). These dynamics take into consideration the exchange of ideological, sociological, techno-economical, ecological, temporal, socio-cultural, and missiological barriers that include the person and his or her entire vital cycle (Paredes 2000, 63-67).

Mission is born not from the nature of the church but from the nature of God. According to Matthew, for example, mission is primarily *Missio Dei* (God's mission) and not the church's mission. The mission of the church comes from the *Missio Dei* and serves it (Davies 2000).

The church is missionary by nature. In its pilgrimage it seeks to correct and adapt the missionary practices to new ways of doing mission that conform more to biblical teaching, “according to the model of Jesus Christ”; a reflection in which its characteristic is the reflection of its own evangelical conviction about the missionary obligation of the church and a critical attitude towards the traditional way of carrying it out (Escobar 1999, 19).

The contextualization of mission is the way in which the church perceives its missionary commitment, how it carries out its task, not only in the historical aspect, but also in its method and scope.

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The Debate

According to David Bosch, the church defines its theology and its missionary practice with certain cultural characteristics, in other words, paradigms that coincide with “cultural” periods. Each paradigm has a cultural bias. We consciously or unconsciously adopt a cultural paradigm in our missionary practice. Under this premise, the tourist package as a model of mission is one answer to the social cultural situation that is taking place (Shepherd 2006).

Short-term mission is an inappropriate adaptation of Bosch's thesis, because the diversity of missionary practices among Catholics and Protestants in Latin America (Escobar 1999, 57) respond to a situation of injustice, violence, and other forms of expressions of sin that the system of short-term trips cannot address or comprehend since these issues require a long-term effort and commitment and are the result of a long-term responsibility (Cook 2006). Short-term medical missions, for example, do not effect a change in incidence and frequency of illnesses or in long-term improvement in access to medical services; neither do they permit the long-term planning and commitment needed to improve the state of the local health systems (Montgomery

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2006).

Shepherd (2006) believes that some tourism-related processes can shed light on those aspects of missions in contemporary cultural, making it possible to minimize the distortions and maximize the opportunities to mobilize youth for missions.

His position distorts the meaning of mission and situates the local church in a subordinate position, minimizing its missionary nature, at risk that it act only under mere opportunism. The community of faith, the backbone and model of truth, lives to take the gospel to all nations, until the end of times and to the end of the earth. That endeavor is the main character in missions. To carry out the *Missio Dei*, we must start from the local church (*Missio Ecclesiae*).

If missiology makes the most out of each cultural period, and if it grow out of social science, it does so examining the socio-cultural diversity, discerning how the communities of

faith will develop their mission under the guidance of the Bible and the Holy Spirit, stressing the contextualization of mission as a guideline for present and future research. Every missionary practice, every crossing of barriers, every contact with other cultures, every material and social help carrying the gospel, begins with a more honest presence of the local church.

Mission and the Contextualization of Mission: Perspective from the Local Church

Transcultural Mission

It is the “task of the local church to cross geographical or cultural barriers in and out of the country of origin, by sending missionaries, whether church planters or auxiliary missionaries such as teachers, evangelists, pastors, or servants.” (Cueva 1995, 13)

In all its dimensions of faith practice the church can affect the entire society and its socio-cultural environment. Disregarding the “missionary presence and practice” of the local congregations distorts the nature and concept of mission itself.

The Word Incarnated

This fundamental act of God’s saving work tells us that the Word translates itself into a visible reality that our eyes can see (Escobar 1999, 12). If we want to understand the model of contextualization, we must comprehend the principle and background that lies in the incarnated *Word*. Its entrance in the history and culture of humanity is essential to answer many questions for contemporary missiology.

Christ adopted the ways of expression and language of the Jewish culture, but furthermore, he embodies himself in each period of time and in each place where his church is in the world. Availability is his own initiative. Today, as yesterday and tomorrow, Jesus Christ is present, certainly in a beautiful multiethnic, multi-linguistic and pluricultural expression.

*Is Every Trespass
of Geographical Barriers "Mission"?*

The European or US American perspective understands mission as the continuity of the model of missionary agencies or something similar: in other words, a missionary practice where the local church serves to strengthen the strategy of the visitors, not to discern it. The motive that regulates such a missionary task is a pragmatism that sacrifices scriptural principles.

The contribution and influence of the missionary societies in evangelization and mission from Europe towards the third world is a story that needs to be reviewed with both gratitude and honesty, for the purpose of returning to the local church its responsibility and leadership role in mission. The urgency of the command and the second coming of Christ mobilized the European and North American churches to fill the earth with the message of salvation. The result was a numerical growth of the evangelical population in the southern hemisphere, but with a weak presence and insufficient influence in many situations of visible injustice and corruption where Christian churches have been established.

Jesus Christ said, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations (*ethnes*).” God says to make disciples, not converts. Faithfulness to discipleship deeply seeks the destruction of

the structures that harm mission. There is no honor in discipleship if we do not integrate the disciple into the communion of the body of Christ and teach him or her to obey the command holistically. According to the apostle Paul, local congregations served as bridges for their work in, from, and to other cultures of the world with the gospel.

For Latin America the mission-task transcends cultures. We are moved not just by the urgency of the gospel but also by the sense of dignity and restoration that the gospel communicates. Short-term projects cannot achieve something of larger transcendence in a few days or weeks without a profound prior knowledge of the culture and native language and without the necessary time to build relationships with the people (Lee, n.d.).

Missiological Parallelism

Missiological parallelism means developing the missionary task in a parallel manner within and outside our country..., carrying out the local and outside task in a simultaneous way. (Cueva 1995, 33)

As the Iglesia Misionera Evangélica (IME, Evangelical Missionary Church), we foster a missiology from an interpretation according to Luke's understanding of mission. The church has received the power of the Holy Spirit; it is called to be "martyr." starting in Jerusalem and moving to all Judea, Samaria, and the end of the world. It is a mission in parallel! The "how" depends on the reflection and encounter between Word and culture, as it occurs in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Do we know the reality of the world that needs the gospel in order to be transformed? How does the church respond to God's call and to the needs of the cultures of the world?

The church is equipped with talents to develop God's assignment. When discipleship emphasizes a formation that is in accordance with the missionary nature and vocation

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of the churches in the world, we can live a missiology under the missiological parallelism approach. Then we prepare, train, and send missionaries beyond our own boundaries. They could be church planters, pastors, teachers, evangelists, or service workers.

Migrations and Trans-Cultural Mission

The migratory movement in the world has transformed many cities into a pluriculturality of expressions in one same geographical context. This migration of people can occur within a nation in a process of movement from rural to urban places, or within a continent, with the exodus from poor countries to rich ones, or between continents, to an old colonial country or even to a democratic regime where it is believed that the streets are paved in gold (Evans 2002).

In this context, two models can help improve the mission task from the southern hemisphere (Escobar 1995, 35-36).

In the **cooperative model**, the financial resources of the churches from rich countries join the human resources of the churches from the poor countries to carry out the missionary task in a third environment of need. Cooperation occurs in the process of training and the exchange of experiences for the benefit of the church from the north and the south.

The advantages of short-term trips for the visitors include affirmation of their call, discovery of their gifts, knowledge of other socio-cultural realities, search and rediscovery of diverse evangelistic methods, intensification of their vision for transcultural missionary work, challenges in their faith, and larger responsibility for intercession (Lee, n.d.). But how is the local church role understood? What is its place in mission?

Congregations tend to maintain their status of "receptor" church or "sender" church, awaiting the next opportunity to play the same roles. It is a shared sin. If unilateralism is a problem of agenda, conditions, or methodology, there are those who promote it and those who accept it. The short-term group and the local church usually only meet to welcome, accompany, and say good bye to each other. There may have been vague research and study of the culture, a certain contact with a few pastors, but the local church generally takes no leading role. No cooperation or real reflection exists, only imposition and acceptance.

The cooperative model can be improved. Cooperation is a shared effort at all levels. A short-term visit can serve as part of a long-term effort, training, or service; short-term may be one part of mission but does not define mission. Latin American missiology does not perceive a reality that is narrow or of short duration but one that involves the making of disciples, not converts. To designate these short-term trips as "mission" is a mistake, a distortion of the very nature of the mission of God and the mission of the church.

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Second, the **migratory model** is characterized by spontaneous missionary action and by the participation of all the members of a community in the missionary task and not only by some specialists called “missionaries.”

Many Christian pilgrims (migrants) in the world share their faith and make disciples; after some time they ask a local church for help to provide a pastor to work among the people who have been converted. This paradigm provides one more reason to foster transcultural missiology from within the local church. Even when the evangelizing task takes place, we are typically being weak in the mission of the church. Pastors, teachers, theologians, and missiologists have a heavy responsibility in this regard.

Such reflection begs the following questions: How do we perceive African or Latin American missiology? Is it the result of our own reflection or is it adopted from other socio-cultural realities? What do we consider when developing mission strategies? What qualities must the participants of a short-term mission trip possess to be selected? To what point are short-term mission trips no more than unconscious cultural projections of a system that allows it? (Vílchez 2006) Will our situation of poverty and of a limited economy continue being an excuse for the Christian from the third world to avoid his or her missionary responsibility?

Building Two-Way Bridges for Mission

A mission project in, from, or towards Latin America requires inter-ecclesiastical missionary cooperation, a missionary dialog between members of the body of Christ, a common purpose, honoring the gifts of the Holy Spirit, appreciating the talents and capacities of the participants, and, above all, recognizing that even though the realities

are not the same, what is the same is a common christological sense of the church's mission.

The church from the southern hemisphere must recognize its social and economic reality, its limitations, and its transcultural missionary practice. **The church from the northern hemisphere must recognize its need to be re-evangelized and to recover its high sense of the local church in mission, not through para-ecclesiastical resources as their main strength but through missionary initiatives that rise from the heart of the local congregations. Furthermore, northern churches can learn a lot from third world missiology.**

Although the African and Latin American churches are poor and face dramatic challenges due to the social and economic crises of their regions, they are sending missionaries to other parts of the world (Escobar 1999, 14). How will we work in the future? What type of disposition will the northern and the southern hemisphere have? Will we help each other mutually? How should the missionary bridges of cooperation be built best? Can the western structures of mission improve, change, and be annulled? Should these missionary societies, churches, seminaries, or training centers reconsider their understanding of mission to improve our missionary dialog? What kind of participation will these missions have in the sending of missionaries of the third world to the western world and other continents? (Scott 2002)

The priority is to share. It can be a task, a purpose, an experience, money—anything, but it should be shared. What is shared first in the context of the church is faith. What

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comes out of the koinonia of faith is the koinonia of deeds (Scott 2002).

Given the gravity of our global mobility, we should look for more honorable methods of mission than a mere short-term tourist trip.

When we share we dignify mission, we honor our call, we glorify our vocation. Through two-way bridges we can open spaces for the exchange of missionaries through the entire world. Latino people who reside in countries with an official language other than Spanish, for example, need the help of Spanish-speaking missionaries in order to be reached. There, the local churches can share their work with other Latin American churches. This work might develop through medium and long-term projects, but the important thing is thinking in a continuity of mission where the Holy Spirit continues showing us new reformed ways for the local church in its missionary practice.

Latin Americans are entering Spain like a torrent. In Portugal there are Angolans from Africa who speak Portuguese, and there have been people from Asia and Africa in Great Brittan for a long time; in addition we are experiencing an enormous movement of economical and political refugees who seek a better life in countries that are more stable and prosperous. This process involves millions of people and also weakens traditional cultures and religious ties and allows for people to reconsider the meaning of life once their primary economic needs are met (Evans 2002). Given the gravity of our global mobility, we should look for more honorable methods of mission than a mere short-term tourist trip.

Unilateralism and passivity will place the missionary task of the next fifty years in danger; if we do nothing, a whole reality of potential children and youth will be lost because

we reduced the biblical, christological, and pauline sense of mission.

“The missionary strategy of the third millennium must be aware of these movements of peoples and at the same time be active in compassionate help and in evangelism” (Evans 2002). We need a missiology that is coherent with Scripture and with the needs that arise in the world because of the migratory movement. It is urgent for our local congregations to become true missionary forces, seeking adequate strategies starting from recognizing themselves as the drivers of God’s plan in the entire world.

Mission and Spirituality

True spirituality drives the community of faith towards a transcultural mission from the local churches. It is not compelled by vision but by obedience, by identity, because the Spirit of God who guides us to all truth is the missionary *par excellence*. We need to rediscover the power of *Parakletos*, the “other of the same species” in the book of Acts and his place in the extension of the gospel. Does spirituality motivate the local church in its mission-task? Or is it just an ecstatic experience?

If the mission-task does not arise from the missionary identity of the entire community of faith, if it does not enrich it, if it does not strengthen it, we are abusing the good (or bad?) will of the body of Christ. In spite of noble results in some aspects and with certain benefits in terms of conversions and social aid, a false mission-task denies the missionary nature of the congregation. The ecclesiology of the book of Acts is clear and definite in this sense.

True Pentecostalism understands that mission is a quality of the neo-testamentarian church. As Christians from the

first century, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, today we can commit ourselves to return the local church to its rightful place. We must not judge it by its size or the situation in which it lives. Let's promote a transcultural mission with missiologies of our own that arise from contact with the culture and the Word.

Our Experience as a Local Church

In the IME, we teach the Christian to commit to God, his Word, and his church in transcultural mission, starting with our locality and extending towards all the nations until we reach the Muslim world; and through missionary offerings, a commitment to be equipped and sent, and a life of prayer. This identity has helped us not to develop a mentality of dependence, of shortage of resources or workers, or an unequal task, but it has moved us to carry out cooperative work to receive different teams that have come to Cerro de Pasco to join us in our calling.

The Learning Process

The Beginning: A Vertical Model

In our first experiences with international missions, the agenda, the agreements, and the planning of the work came from outside without any previous coordination. We did not know specifically what was to be achieved, there were no details of the ministries that the sending church had to offer, and there was no exchange or fraternal dialogue to promote the transcultural mission. As the receptor congregation, we only carried out a middleman role. We had to be prepared for the next visit, make the arrangements to receive the group, and take them to places where they could share the gospel. We were following a model in which the visitors' feelings and desires coincided with their own

interpretations and with the missionary practices of the western world.

The vertical model had the following characteristics:

- ◆ Imposition. No suggestions are accepted nor is there any participation in the decision making. There is a disdain towards the theological and missiological contribution of the receptor church. The visitors only turn to the receptor church in terms of their utility or benefit to the foreign program.
- ◆ Improvisation of methods and resources. The group comes with a “package” of spiritual and material resources that does not work. The imported technology becomes more important than the contextualized methods (Adeney 2003).
- ◆ Isolated work with no continuity. The STM is not a part of a longer process, and everything ends when the visitors leave. They spoke, shared testimonies, gave things; and they returned to their country with the idea that they did an incredible job.
- ◆ Depersonalization. The projects become more important than the people (Adeney 2003).
- ◆ Ethnocentrism and superiority complex. The Christians from the receptor church only serve to work as guides and interpreters.
- ◆ Minimization of the identity and authority of the church. It is incorrectly believed that transcultural mission is only possible coming from rich countries.

This verticality in the decision making caused difficulties on three occasions with groups from France and England where the local church only channeled the efforts. The social and spiritual impact occurred in interactions with children,

but the motive to serve them was the image of “poor and needy.” The visitors did not take into account the whole social, cultural, political, and economical background of the person.

As the teams, led by one or two people, get close to children, these children already have them figured out. They know that if they want to receive gifts, they only have to raise their hand and “receive Christ,” so they do it again and again. It is dishonest when the Christian leaders from the receptor community fail to warn the visitors about these cases; and it turns into a never-ending custom of receiving and not letting the Holy Spirit show us renewed and authentic ways of doing a cooperative missionary work.

The children’s families think they should send the kids only if there are gifts. For them, a foreign visit means donations, not an opportunity to see Jesus in the face of other cultures.

In ministering to children, STM visitors are often motivated by pity for ‘the poor and needy but fail to consider the larger context of the children’s lives



Over time, we have implemented the following corrections to this model:

- ♦ Depending on the characteristics of the visiting team, the local church directs or co-directs the project.
- ♦ The brief stay can be spent as a way of training and learning for both the visiting and local team.
- ♦ There is improved communication and research of the social, political, and economical reality of the place where the work will be carried out.
- ♦ We emphasize a shared effort through the establishment of “two-way bridges” for the crossing and sending of missionaries in all continents.
- ♦ We develop a reciprocal relationship, on an equal footing, of missionary cooperation.
- ♦ The brief presence of foreign Christians forms part of a longer process.

The Present: A Cooperative Model

God’s mission for his church is the action of planting and establishing churches, according to Paul’s theology of mission. (Cueva 1999, 13)

This principle helped us establish a better model of cooperative work that contributes to strengthening the commitment of the entire congregation to transcultural mission. We established a link between pastors of a Methodist congregation in Oregon, USA, in the year 2001, and since then we have worked together in cooperation.

The benefits have been mutual from the start. Visitors from this congregation have already come four times to Cerro de Pasco to serve together the purposes of the kingdom. They know our work and our desire to send

missionaries to the world, including to North America. Today we maintain fraternal contact and pray to be directed in future encounters.

In the year 2005, a sister from this congregation stayed with us for two months. She joined our church's youth group (Juventud Misionera) and participated in the activities planned for that year (evangelism in schools and in the university, open-air events with music and drama). The impact in her life and her own ministry motivated the US American congregation to send another group of sixteen people, including pastors, youth, and professionals in 2006.

Benefits and Results of the Missionary Cooperative Model:

Sender Church	Receptor Church
Assumes their trip as an integrating part of practical training and formation.	Strengthens its call, vision, and mission.
Perceives mission from the receptor church's perspective.	Strengthens companionship and eliminates the individualistic model or the model of dominance.
Clearer comprehension of the cooperative missionary work.	Motivates and strengthens the different ministries in the local church.
Strengthening of their faith, affirmation of their call.	Strengthens its identity and missionary nature.
Challenged to learn other languages for efficient communication.	Strengthens prayer, offerings, and the sending of missionaries to the world. Eliminates the false image of "the little poor people."
Better comprehension and commitment to establish two-way bridges for missionaries to cross throughout the world.	Strengthens the training of missionaries that will be sent out into the world.

Conclusions: Towards a Biblical Contextualization of Mission and Missionary Cooperation

The following thoughts provide a summary of reflections on the contextualization of mission (see Arroyo 2004):

1. Contextualization dignifies God's mission and the gospel, returning to the human being his or her own dignity as divine creation. This dignification requires longer processes and cooperative work in the midst of our globalized world.
2. The local church is an active agent of mission and is the channel through which God develops his work. The community of faith is missionary by nature and serves under the dynamics of the Holy Spirit.
3. In missions, the church crosses barriers (geographic, cultural, linguistic, economic, etc.), thus establishing two-way bridges for missionaries to cross throughout the whole world.
4. Biblical contextualization is bidirectional, based on cooperation and mutual inter-ecclesiastic learning.
5. The local church is called to be the key player, using the resources it has developed in its missionary task throughout the history of mission.
6. It recognizes the realities and social changes in the world. In Latin America, we speak of movements for social justice that include cultural values—language, customs, and arts—and new economic and political concepts.
7. Mission does not occur in a social vacuum. In the southern hemisphere it means that we must open our eyes to the sufferings of the people, the situation of

corruption, violence, injustice, extreme poverty, and abuse (Bosch 2000, 520).

8. Mission comes from the Word and is faithful to it. It is not conditioned or subject to one philosophy, ideology, policy, denomination, or culture or to the same context as the final authorized Word (Bosch 2000, 523).
9. Christ's incarnation is the model for understanding the way in which Latin America perceives the reality of the gospel, how the gospel becomes contextualized, how it spreads, and the way it singularly develops in any culture or nation of the earth.
10. Mission is attentive to "the danger that soars upon every attempt to lessen the importance of the gospel or, on the contrary, make its contextualization absolute" (Bosch 2000, 523).
11. Finally, the gospel is not against culture; rather it gathers the positive aspects of culture and affirms them under the model and lordship of Christ to form a community with particular characteristics that make it different from other cultures of the world.

A contextualization that is faithful to the gospel, to history, to the world, and to its varieties of peoples, ethnic groups, and languages "does not conform to the *tendencias* (gr. *aion*) of society." Every contextualization of mission requires the renovation of the mind for a true transformation. The church of Christ needs a renovation of its models of mission, according to the gospel, to cultures, and to the challenges of today's world.

The danger in the process of incarnating the gospel is that we can yield to contemporary tendencies that are irreconcilable with the gospel. It then becomes no longer contextualization but accommodation, a distortion where

the world and not the Spirit guides the work of the church and its mission in human history. The *Missio Dei* must always direct the course and the model of the *Missio Ecclesiae*.

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