

*The War in Iraq: The Latin American Churches Speak Out**

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So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. (Romans 12:5)

And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. (I Corinthians 12:26)

The invasion of Iraq in March 2003 by the armed forces of the United States, Great Britain, and a few allies provoked a great polarization in our world. The overwhelming majority of demonstrations outside the United States were protests against the war. Although there were large protests within the United States as well, surveys revealed that leading up to the invasion North Americans were fairly evenly divided, in favor and against the war. Once the bombs began to fall, the percentage of North Americans who supported the war rose to 70% or even higher.

This chapter narrates how various Protestant churches and organizations in Latin America responded to this war. As a backdrop it should be mentioned that some denominations in the United States (mostly “mainline” denominations and the Roman Catholic Church) officially came out against the war. But at the level of the “person in the pew,” patriotic support for “the President and our troops” was quite strong. Support from the “evangelical” wing of United States Protestantism was even higher, probably above 80%.

Latin American Protestants and the War

How did Protestants in Latin America respond? Three major options seemed possible. The first option presupposed that, given the historical relationship between Latin American Protestants and their counterparts (missionaries, literature, funding, etc.) in the United States, it would seem plausible that Latin American Protestants would support the war. Perhaps even more likely was the possibility that the Latin American churches would remain silent on the issue, typical of their *apolitical* posture throughout most of the twentieth century.¹ Lastly, given the fact that Latin Americans in general were quite against the war, it was possible that the Latin American churches would also take a public stand against the war.

This third option is, indeed, the one that was chosen. What is surprising is that the overwhelming majority of Latin American churches that took a public position regarding the war strongly denounced it, and they based their denunciations primarily

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on moral grounds. Most critiques of the war dealt with the first four criteria of the Just War theory.²

Although there is a long tradition of pacifism within the history of Christianity, the more dominant position, especially since Constantine, has been the theory of the Just War. According to this theory, although all Christians are called to be peacemakers, in a few circumstances it might be necessary to use limited warfare to avoid greater bloodshed. Nevertheless, Christians should not participate in wars unless all seven criteria of the Just War theory have been fulfilled. These criteria are (1) just cause; (2) just intention; (3) last resort; (4) formal declaration; (5) limited objectives; (6) proportionate means; (7) noncombatant immunity.³

It could be anticipated that the churches affiliated with the *Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias* (an association of churches in Latin America with ties to the World Council of Churches) would denounce the war, because in the past it has criticized the foreign policies of the United States. Nevertheless, it was not so readily expected that conservative churches and “apolitical” churches would do the same. The examples that follow are merely a sample of their pronouncements.

The Executive National Committee of the *Unión Evangélica Pentecostal Venezolana* (Venezuelan Evangelical Pentecostal Union) sent a pastoral letter to all of their member churches expressing their “rejection of the war that is currently being waged in Iraq and of the world war project that the great centers of world power are orchestrating.”⁴ Consequently the pentecostal leaders “urge the governments of the United States, England and Spain to heed the voices that are raised everywhere in opposition to the war, because it does not guarantee the well-being nor the security of any person or nation.”⁵

The Executive Committee of the *Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana* (Latin American Theological Fraternity) strongly denounced the war and declared it to be “illegal, immoral and inhumane.”⁶ The declaration accused the United States and Great Britain of having supported the despot Saddam Hussein for decades and now waging war against him in an invasion that attempted to hide their economic interests. The true motives of the war were connected to a similar penetration in Latin America such as the *Plan Pueblo-Panamá*, the *Plan Colombia* and the *ACLA*. In addition to all the immoralities of the war, it would also have negative effects on evangelism, because “the havoc wreaked by two ‘Christian’ nations would invalidate the proclamation of the gospel in cultures whose voices and contributions we have not yet listened to nor appreciated.”⁷

One of the most surprising denunciations of the war came from the Baptist World Alliance. While some prominent Baptists in the United States came out in support of the war, the Baptist World Alliance with strong influence from its Latin American members condemned the invasion as “a great sin.” In the capital, Washington D.C., the Alliance declared that “war is always a failure of humanity to achieve the will of God for peace.”⁸

The *Red Latinoamericana de Abogados Cristianos* (RLAC, Latin American Network of Christian Lawyers), consisting of more than 100 legal professionals from 14 Latin American countries, expressed “their most profound rejection of this illegitimate military intervention.”⁹ As could be expected, this legal association protested the violations of international law and against its democratic foundations. They denounced the hypocrisy of the Bush administration for “the way that the North

American government has manipulated democratic values and, under the guise of democracy, it would sacrifice innocent Iraqi men, women, and children, in the quest of economic and geopolitical interests.”¹⁰ They accused the United States of a moral “double standard” by attacking a nation without following the appropriate channels established by the Magna Carta of the United Nations.

The *Foro Ecuménico por la Paz y la Reconciliación* (Ecumenical Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, Guatemala) groups together the Episcopal, Presbyterian, Guatemalan Lutheran, and *Cristo Rey* Lutheran Protestant Churches, the Conference of Guatemalan Evangelical Churches (*Conferencia de Iglesias Evangélicas de Guatemala* or CIEDEG), in addition to the Ecumenical and Theological Commission of the Roman Catholic Bishops Conference (*La Comisión de Ecumenismo y Teología de la Conferencia Episcopal*), the Conference of Religious Orders and the Orthodox Church Community. This Ecumenical Forum denounced the United States’ invasion of Iraq and unmasked the motivations used to justify the war. “Wars are unnecessary and do not coincide with the ethical and moral values of our societies; only those cultures and people that promote relationships of unequal, asymmetrical power, competition, mistrust, fears, frustrations, and threats *justify wars in order to maintain their position*.”¹¹ The pronouncement alluded to the passages in the Old Testament where “God is our reason for hope, as the strength of life and guarantee of peace for the future of men and women.” People must therefore reject the use of armed conflict. The document urged the Guatemalan people to “express themselves in favor of peace and to commit themselves to never lose sight of the Guatemalan peace process.”¹² On March 30 the Evangelical Conference carried out a liturgical ceremony that brought together leaders and members of the Mennonite, Kaqchikel Presbyterian, Catholic, Pentecostal, Central American, and Orthodox churches, in which David Son, Executive Secretary of the CIEDEG, extended an exhortation to Bush and Blair to reconsider their actions: “The powerful act out of evil when they fuel war. We hope that those who push a button to destroy might have a moment of reflection about the impact of their actions that cut short human life.”¹³

The *Universidad Politécnica de Nicaragua* (UPOLI, the Polytechnic University of Nicaragua) is sponsored by the Baptist Church in Nicaragua. During the first days of April 2003, students from the university presented an exhibition showing the effects of the missiles and bombs that were falling upon Iraq. Titled “When the Powerful Believe Themselves to be Gods,” the exposition denounced the war unleashed by the governments of the United States and England and the suffering caused to children, to the hungry, to the disinherited and to those who were being used as human shields. María del Socorro Rodríguez, professor of the University, stated, “The war against Iraq violates international law. I do not want to be an accomplice, by my silence, to an action that undermines the foundations of world peace.”¹⁴ The Palestinian ambassador to Nicaragua, George Salama, addressed the students and discredited Bush’s argument regarding the weapons of mass destruction that Saddam Hussein supposedly possessed. The diplomat affirmed, “Saddam Hussein is not a danger for international security nor for peace, because he does not possess chemical nor biological weapons, nor relations with terrorist organizations.”¹⁵ He affirmed that the true motivation for the invasion was oil and the concomitant control of the Middle East. Hundreds of university students and professors responded to the exhibition with fasting and prayer vigils on behalf of world peace.

The Latin American and Caribbean Pre-Assembly of the World Lutheran Federation met in San Salvador, El Salvador, during April 6-9, 2003. Delegates took advantage of their meeting to pronounce a prophetic word regarding the war. In the inaugural address, Brazilian theologian Walter Altmann connected his comments on the war with the general theme of the assembly: "The holistic healing of the world." He affirmed that "with much fewer resources than those spent in the war we could solve problems like world hunger and other acute needs...the war will have an extremely high human and social cost, not only in civilian deaths, especially children, but also due to the destruction of basic resources for the survival of the people."¹⁶ His predictions are sadly coming true.¹⁷ Altmann foresaw tragic consequences for the relations between religions, particularly between Islam and Christianity, because "Bush (just like Saddam Hussein) insists on invoking the blessing of God upon his bellicose action." In the same assembly, Ismael Noko, the General Secretary of the World Lutheran Federation, repeated a condemnation of the war as unjustifiable for having violated international and ethical norms. Noko, with eerie accuracy, predicted that "the United States and Great Britain will win the war, but will lose the peace" and "with this attack the anti-U.S. sentiment will deepen throughout the world and will provoke greater tensions between Christian and Muslim communities."¹⁸

On April 10, Federico Pagura, Bishop Emeritus of the Argentine Methodist Church, denounced the war of the United States and its allies against Iraq and called it a "genocidal invasion" against the Iraqi people. He condemned the hypocrisy of the United States for having initiated aggression "with the pretext of overthrowing Saddam Hussein who, like other dictators around the world, has been created and/or maintained by administrations of *the same imperial colossus of the North*."¹⁹ Pagura identified the United States as "the number one terrorist power on earth." He joined other Latin American evangelical leaders (such as the ex-president of the *Universidad Bíblica Latinoamericana* in Costa Rica, Elsa Támez) in his commitment to not traveling to the United States as a personal protest.

Mexico

Mexican Protestants also announced their repudiation of the war. A wide spectrum of seminaries, including the Anglicans, the Baptists, the Lutherans, the Methodists, the Presbyterians and the influential *Comunidad Teológica de México*, plus the Berea, Elim and Anabaptist Bible Institutes, came together to publish a joint declaration in which they affirmed, "we join our voice to the official voice of various Christian entities throughout the world and in Mexico that have declared to be against the war" and "we declare ourselves to be against the official posture of the governments of the United States, Great Britain and Spain who in the name of God are invading Iraq."²⁰ They later insinuated that Bush and his allies practice idolatry because they serve another god. "This is not the God that we know. The One that we know is the God of history and therefore, the One that demands justice, peace and love. This is the God that is revealed in Jesus Christ, who opens opportunities for life, for inclusiveness, and for solidarity. It is the God who calls us to be the peacemakers in the construction of a new earth."²¹

One of the most surprising declarations came from the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico (INPM). In their official magazine, *El Faro*, the Presbyterians condemned the war against Iraq in no uncertain terms. The title itself "*La Iglesia*

Nacional Presbiteriana de México se une a la Alianza Reformada de Iglesias y condena la guerra contra Irak” (The National Presbyterian Church of Mexico joins with the Alliance of Reformed Churches to Condemn the War against Iraq) expressed their passionate cry against the war.²²

The declaration begins with “profound sadness and sorrow” because “the force of international opinion was not able in the last instance to dissuade the government of the United States and the few allies that followed it from launching a war that will bring about suffering, misery, and death for thousands of Iraqis and perhaps many other people from other places.”²³ The article denounces this war begun without the authorization of the United Nations as “immoral and illegal. And utilizing a term that is traditional to us, it is a *sin*.”²⁴ Therefore, “we Presbyterians categorically condemn the war for the unilateral and imperialistic mentality upon which it is based. No nation, however powerful it may be, can act upon the world scene just as it wishes.”²⁵ The article later refers to President Bush. It alludes to his affirmation that the people of the world have to be *in favor of or against* the United States. “A unipolar world, in which a superpower offers us the option of being with it or against it is an unacceptable world from a moral and political point of view. President Bush and his administration need to remember that *the evangelical option is to be in favor of or against Christ*.”²⁶ Bush’s affirmation came so close to blasphemy that many Latin American Christians identified the United States’ connection between faith and patriotism as “Yankee syncretism.”

Later, the article criticizes the government of the United States for utilizing anti-democratic methods in the United Nations. “We congratulate the majority of the countries represented on the United Nations Security Council and especially our country for not allowing themselves to be *hounded, bribed, or intimidated* to the point of supporting the war. We call upon the General Assembly of the United Nations to discuss at the earliest possible moment this reckless affront to international law.”²⁷

The article ends with various exhortations: one to the people of the world and to their governments to “reaffirm the authority of the United Nations.” The second exhortation is addressed to the aggressor states, demanding that “they immediately stop their attacks.” The final exhortation is for the church to “pray and make its voices of protest heard.”

This declaration of the Mexican Presbyterian Church is surprising due to the denomination’s own history in the political realm. In its beginnings, The Presbyterian Church had been quite active in Mexican politics. Nevertheless, beginning in the 1930s the Presbyterians entered into a period in which they strove to become “apolitical.”²⁸ In Mexico, the Presbyterians are known as one of the most conservative denominations, especially with regard to socio-political issues. In 1972 the denomination broke off official ties with the Presbyterians in the United States because they were “too liberal.” More recently, Mexican Presbyterians have strengthened connections with the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA), one of the more conservative denominations in the United States. This declaration of the Mexican Presbyterians went against the sentiments of many of their fellow Presbyterians in the United States.

Later Events

In recent months several churches have continued their pronouncements regarding the situation in Iraq. In the first days of September 2003, the Salvadoran Lutheran

Synod made a declaration against the sending of Salvadoran troops to participate with the occupation forces in Iraq. The situation in Iraq is “extremely dangerous” for the 380 Salvadoran soldiers who are located there.²⁹ Their declaration made reference to the fact that El Salvador, as a member of the United Nations and as a signer of the Chapultepec Peace Accords (1992), committed itself to work for peace and reconciliation. Having intimately known war, our people “reject war.” Bishop Medardo Gomez asked for the annulment of the legislative decree that authorized the sending of troops to Iraq. He argued that it was illegal because El Salvador had not declared war upon Iraq.

In September of 2003, the Micah Network brought together 185 evangelical leaders from more than 50 countries in Queretaro, Mexico, to discuss the theme of globalization from a Christian perspective. Although the war in Iraq was not part of the original schedule, the delegates recognized the necessity to deal with it. The final declaration expressed that the International Court must be strengthened so that it could better judge cases of international wars. It demanded that the United Nations be supported with greater finances so that it would be able to better carry out its functions. It also denounced the use of “terrorism” as a pretext for wars, when 30, 000 persons die every day due to hunger and illnesses.³⁰

Church leaders in Ecuador³¹ and Argentina have publicly stated that the presence of certain evangelical leaders from the United States would be counterproductive to the proclamation of the gospel in their countries. The clearest example has to do with evangelist Franklin Graham (son of famous evangelist Billy Graham). The younger Graham was scheduled to give evangelistic messages in Rosaio, Argentina, in November 2003, at the “Festival of Hope.” The Kairos Community, with the support of the Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana (Buenos Aires chapter), wrote that the participation of Graham in the evangelical event constituted an “ethical problem of great magnitude, if we keep in mind that Franklin Graham is a religious advisor to George W. Bush, and is frankly offensive, among other reasons, for the explicit support that the preacher gave to the invasion of Iraq by the United States.”³² The Argentine document continued: “While almost the entire world, including many Argentine men and women, perceive the bellicose actions of the governments of George Bush and Tony Blair as a criminal act, how can we Argentine evangelicals give a welcome to someone who has contributed to the utilization of our faith to justify such an act?”³³

Observations

It has been a surprise to many observers to see the unanimity of these pronouncements. Every single one condemned the war as immoral. We are not aware of any denomination in Latin America that came out in favor of the war. An article in one pentecostal magazine did see the war as fitting into God’s eschatological plan, but even this article did not favor the war.

Although Protestant churches, especially the ones that made the declarations, are historically democratic, in general it was their leaders who denounced the war in the name of (and not necessarily consulting with) their members. Perhaps this is the rise of “*profeta evangélico*” (evangelical prophet) or “*cacique religioso* (religious chief).” It is to be expected that Latin American Protestant leaders will make more of these types of pronouncements in the future.

These Latin American churches, at least in symbolic ways, are further severing the umbilical cord with the churches in the United States. Many evangelical leaders in Latin America have rejected the priorities of churches in the North.³⁴ It is likely that the Latin American churches will distance themselves even further from their “spiritual parents” in the north.

Many of the denominations and organizations made declarations that aligned with the posture of their own international ecclesiastical body, for example the World Baptist Alliance, the World Lutheran Federation or the Alliance of Reformed Churches. Many of their critiques pointed out how the United States did not follow the appropriate channels laid out by the United Nations and “went it alone.” These denominations were careful not to commit the same mistake, because they frequently connected their pronouncements with those of their international associations.

In general, the Latin American evangelical protests lined up with the posture of their own national governments and the sentiments of their own people. It is possible to interpret these denunciations as the Latin American expression of “evangelical patriotism.” Nevertheless, there are indications of rising prophetic voices that do challenge the position of national governments (for example, the Lutherans in El Salvador). When church pronouncements and national positions do coincide, a good dose of suspicion is in order. Nevertheless, the essential issue is the content of the argument raised, not its agreement (nor disagreement) with the national position. These denunciations might very well be valid and helpful observations from another perspective.

The invasion of Iraq by the United States and England has raised great interest again in political ethics and the role of churches in modern societies. Latin American churches have begun making their voices heard. Their articulate pronouncements are making a contribution to the ethical debate needed in our contemporary world.

Notes

1. For a good overall view of this “apolitical” stance see C. René Padilla, ed., *De la marginación al compromiso: Los evangélicos y la política en América Latina*. Buenos Aires: Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana, 1991. For a more detailed study of this posture in Mexico see Scott, *Salt of the Earth: A Socio-Political History of Mexico City Evangelical Protestants (1964-1991)*. Mexico City: Editorial Kyrios, 1991.

2. The second chapter of this book analyzes in greater detail the war in Iraq in the light of Just War criteria.

3. These criteria have been clearly articulated by Arthur Holmes in Robert G. Clouse, ed., *War: Four Christian Views*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1981. pp. 117-135.

4. “Iglesias pentecostales rechazan la guerra y llaman a participar en los cambios del país” in *Servicio de Noticias ALC*: March 25, 2003.

5. Ibid.

6. President Lilia Solano Góngora, “Comunicado de la Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana sobre la guerra.” *Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana*: March 24, 2003.

7. Ibid.

8. “Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana y Alianza Bautista Mundial rechazan la guerra” in *Servicio de Noticias ALC*: March 25, 2003.

9. “Abogados cristianos condenan la guerra en Irak” in *Servicio de Noticias ALC*: March 26, 2003.

10. Ibid.

11. Antonio Oztzy, “Foro Ecueménico se suma a clamor mundial y pide cese de ataque a Irak” in *Servicio de Noticias ALC*: April 4, 2003 (emphasis mine).

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.
14. Trinidad Vásquez. "Universitarios presentan exposición 'Cuando los ponderosos se creen dioses'" in *Servicio de Noticias ALC*: April 4, 2003.
15. Ibid.
16. "Walter Altmann pronunció discurso inaugural de pre-asamblea luterana" in *Servicio de Noticias ALC*: April 6, 2003.
17. The accuracy of his prediction is seen in the cost of the war in Iraq and the following reconstruction. It has risen to \$166,000,000,000.00 during the first 16 months and it continues to rise.
18. "El secretario general de la Federación Luterana reafirma rechazo a guerra contra Irak" in *Servicio de Noticias ALC*: April 7, 2003.
19. "Obispo Pagura adhiere a las protestas contra la guerra en Irak" in *Servicio de Noticias ALC*: April 10, 2003 (emphasis mine).
20. "Evangélicos de México, Argentina y Perú también están por la paz" in *Servicio de Noticias ALC*: April 2, 2003.
21. Ibid.
22. President Jorge Lopez Pérez, "La Iglesia Nacional Presbiteriana de México se une a la Alianza Reformada de Iglesias y condena la Guerra contra Irak" in *El Faro* (May-June 2003): 35 (original emphasis).
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid (emphasis mine).
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid (emphasis mine).
27. Ibid (emphasis mine).
28. See the chapter on the *National Presbyterian Church of Mexico* in Scott, *Salt of the Earth*, pp. 49-76.
29. "Luteranos contra el envío de tropas salvadoreñas a Irak" in *Servicio de Noticias ALC*: September 1, 2003.
30. "La Declaración de Querétaro: La Globalización y los Pobres," Querétaro: Red Miqueas (Micah Network), 2003.
31. The Ecuadorian response can be found at <http://www.protestantedigital.com/hemeroteca/006/index.htm>
32. "Fundacion Evangélica Kairos rechaza presentacion del predicador Franklin Graham" in *Servicio de Noticias ALC*: November 4, 2003.
33. Ibid.
34. It is illuminating to see the critique of the North American churches by Brazilian Assembly of God pastor Ricardo Gondim in "Pastor cuestiona la importación de modelos evangélicos" in *Servicios de Noticias ALC*: November 1, 2002. It is important to point out that Gondim had studied in the United States but now rejects what he considers to be non-Biblical alliances that United States evangelicals have formed. His critique included the following: "North American evangelicals sympathize with the Republican Party, venerate their president and believe that the future of their country is tied to prayer in school, prohibition of abortion, and the denunciation of homosexuality...they are not very interested in the emission of toxic gases into the atmosphere, the AIDS epidemic in Africa, or the inequality of commercial relations with the poor countries of our planet." Gondim continued his critique of Protestant preaching in the United States: "You never hear from the North American pulpits any denunciation of the tariffs on imports or subsidies of their agricultural products that affect economies of poor nations. The 'American way of life' and the gospel are Siamese twins. It is almost impossible to separate them."