
Thirty Books That Most Influenced My Understanding of Christian Mission

Samuel Escobar

I could make a distinction in my selection between the books that shaped my practice of mission during the twenty-six years I worked with the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES), some of them inspirational, expressing a deep spirituality, and the books that shaped my missiological reflection, especially after I started to teach mission courses in the United States. I should state that I never followed a formal theological course, and thus reading was decisive. I did not always follow a proper academic path, and I was not confined by any evangelical canon. However, my work on the staff of IFES in the evangelization of university students and the training of leaders for the student movements required a constant formation, for which the older British and American InterVarsity movements provided courses, conferences, lectures, and a constant stream of good literature.

For me, motivation for mission came from two sources. One was missionary stories; the other was inspirational books that today could be placed under the heading of spirituality. I was probably twelve years old, living in my hometown of Arequipa, in southern Peru, when I received as a Sunday school prize a book by Juan C. Varetto, *Héroes y mártires de la obra misionera* (Heroes and martyrs of missionary work), 6th ed. (Buenos Aires: Junta Bautista de Publicaciones, 1958). Varetto was an Argentine Baptist who wrote good mission history in a popular and inspirational style. I often returned to this book. Before going to college I was also deeply moved by the biography of Japanese writer, pastor, and politician Toyohiko Kagawa, from whose missionary immersion among the poor in the Shinkawa slum of Kōbe came his poems *Songs from the Slums* (London: SCM Press, 1935). At some points its Spanish translation, *Cantos de los barrios bajos* (Mexico City: Casa Unida de Publicaciones, 1953), became devotional reading for me. I also got an early grasp of some aspects of mission in several books I read in Spanish by E. Stanley Jones, especially *The Christ of the Indian Road* (New York: Abingdon, 1925).

Authors of the books I read promoting evangelization and mission, which were formative of my practice as IFES student worker, were convinced that there is a firm and strong biblical basis for mission. I would include here John Stott, *Basic Christianity* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1958), which I recall devouring in 1959 on a bumpy bus ride between Quito, Ecuador, and Ipiales, Colombia. Here I would also place Leslie T. Lyall, *A World to Win* (London: Inter-Varsity Press; Overseas Missionary Fellowship, 1972).

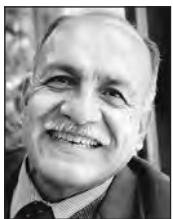
In evangelical literature I found excellent work about the New Testament, and especially about the apostle Paul as a missionary. Most helpful for an outline of Christian apologetics in the early church was F. F. Bruce, *The Apostolic Defence of the Gospel* (Lon-

don: Inter-Varsity Press, 1961). Later, I found especially helpful his book *Paul: Apostle of the Free Spirit* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1977), some chapters of which I heard from Bruce lecturing at Regent College in Vancouver. A refreshing and almost exhilarating experience was reading Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*, in its Spanish version, *La expansión espontánea de iglesia* (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 1960), which took me to his other books. Those of us who admired Michael Green as an evangelist in the IFES circles were especially pleased when he published *Evangelism in the Early Church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1970), a valuable mixture of evangelistic enthusiasm and New Testament scholarship. I have benefited greatly by the creative missiological approach to the Epistle to the Romans used in Paul Minear, *The Obedience of Faith* (London: SCM Press, 1971). It provides a key missiological perspective for a document that is usually read as if it were only a theological essay.

The other formative influence came from books about Jesus' way of discipling his apostles. I realized that several short volumes by colleagues such as Hawaiian Ada Lum and Indian P. T. Chandapilla had benefited from the classic volume by A. B. Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1971, reproduced from the 4th ed., New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1894). The wealth of hermeneutical and homiletical keys in this book is enriching in many ways.

During my active missionary work, however, no evangelical book articulated the biblical basis for mission, encompassing the whole Bible systematically, the way Catholic scholars Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller did in their book *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983). In recent years this has changed, as evangelicals such as Chris Wright and Vinoth Ramachandra have worked intensively in this area.

For decades, the standard work in Spanish about the history of missions has been Justo González, *Historia de las misiones* (Buenos Aires: Methopress, 1970). The updated edition, coauthored with Carlos Cardoza Orlandi, is *Historia general de las misiones* (Barcelona: CLIE, 2008), which I understand will soon appear in English. Their point of view incorporates the reflection on history that González has expounded in his more recent books. Before I started to regularly use Kenneth Scott Latourette's seven-volume classic, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1937–45), I became acquainted with this great Baptist historian through his book *Desafío a los protestantes* (Challenge to Protestants) (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 1957), which is the text of his 1956 Carnahan Lectures at the Union Seminary of Buenos Aires. History was also important in a book that Latin American Protestants consider a classic example of the interpretation of Christianity in the Iberian Peninsula and in Latin America: John A. Mackay, *The Other Spanish Christ* (New York: Macmillan, 1932). For me, its Spanish version, *El otro Cristo español* (Mexico City: CUP, 1952), became a model of missiological reflection, as Mackay applied to his subject historical understanding, theological foundations, and social analysis, all motivated by a deep sense of missionary vocation. Through my work with IFES I became familiar with the American missionary enterprise, but it was an edited volume by Joel A. Carpenter and Wilbert B. Shenk, *Earthen Vessels: Ameri-*



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can Evangelicals and Foreign Missions, 1880–1980 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), that first brought a proper historical approach for understanding this important movement. Andrew Walls's contribution to that symposium, which was my first acquaintance with him, became a model for me of missiological reflection; I have treasured his books.

During my studies at San Marcos University in Lima, Peru (1951–57), social analysis shaped by Marxism was used to severely criticize the missionary enterprise past and present in Latin America. That challenge, together with our search for a holistic missionary model in IFES student work throughout Latin America, motivated my interest and research regarding the social analysis of the missionary enterprise. I found very helpful E. A. Judge, *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the New Testament* (London: Tyndale Press, 1960), and then later Max Warren, *Social History and Christian Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1967), as well as Stephen Neill, *Colonialism and Christian Mission* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967). A helpful book of reference is Roger Mehl, *The Sociology of Protestantism* (London: SCM Press, 1970), which has an excellent chapter on the sociology of missions.

As I traveled all over Latin America, I could see the socially transforming power of spiritual experience, especially among Pentecostals. This growing awareness connected with my study and reflection about the beginnings of the Methodist movement and the relationship between spiritual revival, mission, and social transformation. Early in college days I had gained an overview and a contextual interpretation of Methodism through Mexican Bible scholar and historian Gonzalo Báez Camargo, especially in his *Genio y espíritu del metodismo wesleyano* (Genius and spirit of Wesleyan Methodism) (Mexico City: CUP, 1962). Later, I was impacted significantly by John Wesley Bready, *England Before and After Wesley* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938). This subject was explored from an ecclesiological perspective by Howard A. Snyder in several books, especially *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1980). More recently, a masterpiece along these lines that I have commented on extensively and used as a textbook is David Martin, *Tongues of Fire* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), a sociological analysis of the growth of Pentecostalism in Latin America, using the early growth of Methodism in England and the United States as a comparative key. This awareness of the social conditioning of missionary work, as well as of the social dynamism of spiritual experience, helped me understand both the challenge and the limitations of liberation theologies.

Along a similar line, I found anthropology applied to the understanding and practice of mission useful both in itself and as a corrective of triumphalistic attitudes. I benefited especially from Eugene A. Nida, *Message and Mission* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960; rev. ed., Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1990), and Jacob Loewen, *Culture and Human Values* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1975), some chapters of which I first read in periodicals. This anthropological approach has to do with mission practice critically observed by outsiders. Along the same lines, I must confess that I was deeply impacted by the honest, candid self-exposure in Elisabeth Elliot's novel *No Graven Image* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966). I appreciated also the tone of Eric S. Fife and Arthur F. Glasser, *Missions in Crisis* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1961)—it was self-critical without losing the missionary vision. I have noted, with appreciation, this kind of evangelical self-criticism in several of the Urbana Missionary Conventions I have attended since 1970.

I could say that I was initiated in theological reflection by a book that has a strong missional component: John A. Mackay,

A Preface to Christian Theology (New York: Macmillan, 1943), which I read and studied in its Spanish version, *Prefacio a la teología cristiana* (Mexico City: CUP, 1945). This book is not only a brilliant exposition of theological truth but also a call to action, to "leave the balcony and take the road," ending with a chapter that outlines the mission of the church. Mackay also introduced me to the thought of the Dane Søren Kierkegaard, Russian Nikolai Berdiaev, and Spanish Miguel de Unamuno and their passionate criticism of nominal religiosity. I found a similar kind of theologizing from a missional perspective in the books of Lesslie Newbigin, especially *A Faith for This One World* (London: SCM Press, 1961), *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (London: SCM Press, 1966), and *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978; rev. ed., 1995). I found specially significant that Newbigin's *Household of God* (London: SCM Press, 1953) showed a perceptive grasp of the theological significance of Pentecostalism for our understanding of the church and its mission at a time when, in WCC circles, Pentecostals were still considered a sect. I should also mention at this point Emil Brunner, *The Misunderstanding of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953).

Though our IFES leaders were critical of the notion of mission as presence, which was predominant in ecumenical circles during the early 1960s, I was impacted by the fresh, courageous, and challenging thought of Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom* (New York: Seabury Press, 1967), which I found resonated with my Latin American experience. For the same reason I came to appreciate a long and friendly relationship with Anabaptist theologian John Howard Yoder, whose book *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) was a milestone for me.

Some books influenced me in the process of their making. I read them first as articles or heard their contents in conferences, lectures, and discussions with the authors, and only later found them published in book form. In several cases I have returned frequently to the published book, and I have also used it as a textbook for my courses. Such is the case with John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (London: Falcon Books, 1975), in which he deals with key words about mission in the missiological debates of the 1970s. The same happens with René Padilla, *Mission Between the Times* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), and with Orlando Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1982). I would place here also the proceedings of the Berlin Congress on Evangelism, which I was privileged to attend in 1966: Carl F. H. Henry and W. Stanley Mooneyham, eds., *One Race, One Gospel, One Task* (2 vols.; Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1967). Here we can find the biblical expositions by John Stott on the Great Commission, especially his exposition of John 20:21 in which Jesus commissions us, but also provides a model: his own way of doing mission. That, in my opinion, was the basis for a decisive shift in evangelical missiology.

Liberation theologians have had very good press in theological circles in North America. But there is a strong evangelical missionary action that does not follow the aims or proposals of liberation theologies. As I live now in Spain, where one can experience the disintegration of Christendom, books I would like to see published are missiological reflections from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, following the insights and methodologies of Lesslie Newbigin, Andrew Walls, John Howard Yoder, and Jacques Ellul. Realities such as globalization, migration, and the "clash of civilizations" require a global dialogue. Missionary movements from the Southern Hemisphere need to develop a self-critical missiological reflection that will interpret their experience with the help, but not the constraint, of the rich reflection that has taken place in recent decades.

Take a survey of a hundred writers from the mid- to late-twentieth century about the books that influenced them most and youâ€™re bound to find plenty of Henry Miller tucked in with the Victorians, the Russians, and the Beats. The Brooklyn-raised author of such notoriously banned novels as *Tropic of Capricorn* and *Tropic of Cancer* has long appealed to contemporary writers not only because of his frank explorations of sexuality and other taboo subjects but also becauseâ€”like so many avant-garde and not so avant-garde writers after himâ€”he had the audacity to present his own life and loves.

as litera @article{Escobar2010ThirtyBT, title={Thirty Books That Most Influenced My Understanding of Christian Mission}, author={Samuel Escobar}, journal={International Bulletin of Mission Research}, year={2010}, volume={34}, pages={112 - 113} }. Samuel Escobar. Published 2010. Sociology. International Bulletin of Mission Research. He was Thornley B. Wood Professor of Missions at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary (today Palmer Theological Seminary), Wynnewood, Pennsylvania, 1985â€”2005. Presently he teaches at the Baptist Seminary in Madrid.

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