

**IS GOD PERCEIVED AS A GOD OF LOVE?: THE IMPACT OF SPANISH
ROMAN CATHOLIC HERITAGE, MACHISMO, AND EXPERIENCE OF AUTHORITY
ON LATIN AMERICANS' CONCEPT OF GOD**

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The phrase "God is love" is commonly heard in choruses emanating from churches in Latin America. Do the words match up with what people feel? Stan Slade, a professor at a Baptist seminary in San Salvador, has sat in many church services in Central America. He observes that, "God is *confessed* as good, but *experienced* as distant, severe, and though nobody dares to say it--unjust" (1992:148). They believe God is good, yet they also believe God will punish them for missing church services (Slade 1992:147). My interaction with Hondurans has brought me to similar conclusions.

In this paper I will explore three factors that impact people's concept of God in Latin America: their Spanish Roman Catholic heritage, machismo, and their experience of authority. Much of what I write will apply to Latin America in a general way. My interest, however, lies specifically with evangelical churches in Honduras where I have worked for seven years.

Twenty-five years ago as a young boy in a barrio in Tegucigalpa, Diego spent Easter weekend sitting quietly inside. His parents told him that on these days that Jesus was in the grave it would upset God if people made loud noises or moved around too much. Diego struggled to comply, but usually failed. His parents, however, could not yell at him or spank him. They also had to be quiet and still. The punishments waited silently for the resurrection day. When movement was allowed again Diego got, in one session, all the spankings his father could not give him the previous two days. What was Diego's concept of God? That is the question we want to keep with us through this article--asking how the things discussed would affect a person's concept of God. Then we will ask how people like Diego can come to form a different concept of God.

**PART I: SPANISH ROMAN CATHOLIC HERITAGE
AND THE LATIN AMERICAN CONCEPT OF GOD**

SPANISH ROOTS

The form of Christianity brought to Latin America 500 years ago was not simply Roman Catholicism. It was Spanish Roman Catholicism.¹ Eight centuries of Islamic influence left its mark on many aspects of Spanish culture including its Christian religion. Three examples of this influence are the holy war, the fusion of church and state, and moralistic religion. All three of these divergences from biblical Christianity were not unique to Spain. Islamic influence, however, reinforced these notions and they became more pronounced in Spain.²

Reflecting on the Christ the Spanish brought to America, John Mackay writes:
Was it really he who came, or another religious figure with his name and some of his marks? [I think] that Christ, as he sojourned westward, went to prison in Spain,

¹ More accurately I should include Portugal and call this the Iberian form of Catholicism, but I will focus on Spain. It is both the larger part of the Iberian peninsula and the sole influence in the part of Latin America I am most interested in.

² See Deiros 1992: 221-228; Dussel 1981: 38; Ellul 1986: 95-112; and Mackay 1933.

while another who took his name embarked with the Spanish crusaders for the New World, a Christ who was not born in Bethlehem but in North Africa. (1933:95)

The cross and the sword invaded America together. The God that set sail for America spoke with a heavy Moslem accent. This God came wrapped in the glory of the Spanish court, and landed in the midst of conquest, rape and forced conversion.

THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY IN LATIN AMERICA

The conquest produced infamous accounts of forced conversions and mass baptisms. The daunting task of a few evangelizing thousands led to superficial definitions of conversion.

The friars baptized any who wished to receive the holy rite, requesting only that they knew that there is only one God and that Jesus is our redeemer, and that they could recite the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary. In some cases, even these minimal requirements were waived. There were reports of missionaries baptizing hundreds in a single day, sometimes merely sprinkling several of them at the same time. (González 1984:385)

Some secular priests accused the missionaries of oversimplifying baptism--"not of lowering the requirements, as one might expect, but of omitting certain elements in the administration of the rite itself" (González 1984:385).

Conquistadores championed the ritual, but placed little emphasis on the ethical dimension. For example, Cortez's party was quite concerned about how to respond to the gift of native women. The priest, however, agreed to baptize the women so that the men would not defile themselves by having sex with a non-Christian. Whether the women understood the translated instruction did not concern the men (or the priest). It was the act of baptism that counted. When they would leave villages this same party would often leave the Aztec priests in charge of caring for the image of the virgin and the cross that the Spanish had set up after destroying the people's idols. In their mind it seemed more appropriate to have an Aztec priest do this than a "baptized" woman (Trexler 1987:469-492).

The brutality and greed for gold certainly formed a significant part of the native Americans' first impressions of the Spanish and Christianity. Over the course of time, however, the attitude toward rituals and images probably had a more lasting impact. The attitude Cortez displayed by putting crosses on opposite sides of his camps to ward off evil is still seen in Latin America today. Significantly, he told unconverted Aztecs that they could make the same use of the cross (Trexler 1987:483). The power lay in the image, the rite itself.

As a final note in this section we must acknowledge that among the Spanish who came to America a minority raised their voice against the common practices. Bartolomé de Las Casas is the most famous of this group.

THE BLENDING OF RELIGIONS

The confidence placed in the efficacy of rites and images set the stage for syncretism. The Spanish tore down indigenous images and put in their place Christian images. They built Christian cathedrals on the foundations of destroyed temples. Did the people worship the cross, or the image they remembered being in its place? In Cortez's case we could ask if in the eyes of the people the cross made the Aztec priest Christian, or did the presence of the Aztec priest make the cross and the virgin Mary part of the Aztec religion?

There are numerous examples of indigenous rites or festivals that have been integrated into Christian celebrations.³ Perhaps the most common fusion has come in relation to Mary. Indigenous people easily related her to female forms of divinity in their religion such as mother earth or the goddess earth. The most famous example of this syncretism is the Virgin of Guadalupe of Mexico. Octavio Paz writes:

It is not secret to anyone that Mexican Catholicism is centered about the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe. In the first place, she is an Indian Virgin; in the second place, the scene of her appearance to the Indian Juan Diego was a hill that formerly contained a sanctuary dedicated to Tonantzin, "Our Mother," the Aztec goddess of fertility. . . The Virgin is the consolation of the poor, the shield of the weak, the help of the oppressed. . . In addition, the Virgin--the universal Mother--is also the intermediary, the messenger, between disinherited man and the unknown, inscrutable power: the Strange. (1961:84-85)

THE LATIN AMERICAN CHRIST

The supplanting of Christ by Mary is graphically evidenced by an inscription above the door of an old colonial church in Cuzco: "Come unto Mary all ye that labour and are heavy laden and she will give you rest." But, as Mackay writes, "however much overshadowed by his Mother, Christ too came to America" (1933:94-95). The Christ that came was a tragic figure. The Spanish gave Latin America two images of Christ: an infant in his mother's arms and a suffering bleeding victim. "It is the picture of a Christ who was born and died, but who never lived" (Mackay 1933:110).⁴ Therefore, they miss both the ethical and theological implications of the life of Christ. Not only did Latin Americans miss the Christ who lived, the emphasis on the death of Christ tended to overwhelm any attention given to the resurrected Christ who lives.⁵ "A Saviour King who is deeply interested in us and to whom we can bring our joys and sorrows and perplexities, is neither visualized nor experienced" (Mackay 1933:112).

This is not to say that Christ has not played a role in Latin American Catholicism. It has been, however, a narrow role. The pitiful figure of Christ provides an emotional safety valve in the midst of their suffering. "In contrast with the dying Christ, the radiantly beautiful Mary is the benevolent one who is always accessible and always giving. It is Mary who has compassion for the multitude, and it is the contemplation of this symbol which brings reassurance and a sense of hope" (Nida 1974:126).

People also turn to saints in Latin America.⁶ Saints fused well with the pantheon of gods of

³ Dussel offers a graphic example from a Day of Epiphany celebration (1981:63).

⁴ see also Deiros (1992:191).

⁵ A sign of this is that Good Friday is a day taken very seriously with solemn processions. Easter receives little special attention. It could pass as just another Sunday.

⁶ In many ways Jesus is on the level of the saints--at least in the sense of acts of devotion in relation to Jesus and the saints. An indicator of this is the plurality of Christs there are. (Christ of the Sepulcher in Amameca, Mexico; the Christ of Esquipulas in Guatemala; The Miraculous Christ in Buga, Colombia, etc..) Also there are specific rites practiced for the baby Christ, Christ of the cross, etc. (Deiros 1992:157, 191-2).

some indigenous religions where one would appeal to different gods depending on the need. The hierarchical nature of the church contributed to the logic of saints, as did the Spanish cultural practice of seeing friends as a way of influencing higher powers. ("Whatever law or justice may do, a friend can undo"[Mackay 1933:17].)

Mary, Jesus, and the saints continue to be figures of tremendous religious veneration. People practice various rites to seek to gain protection and favors, or to express thanks. This reinforces the notion of a distant God who is better sought out through these mediators. Also as the mindset implicit in these rituals flows over into other areas of church life, such as the sacraments, they too are seen as something to be done to earn good standing with God. These popular religious attitudes also tend to turn people's attention away from the concrete causes and possible solutions to their problems, and hence have facilitated their domination and oppression.

THE SITUATION TODAY

Although this article has attempted to describe general characteristics it has not meant to imply that Roman Catholicism was a monolithic entity in colonial times or is so today. For instance Enrique Dussel, the premier Catholic Latin American church historian, gives a typology offering six different responses to Christianity in the colonial era.⁷

Dussel notes that as in the past, today, "Typical Latin Americans call themselves 'Catholics' because they were baptized" (1981:117). He disagrees with those who call "Latin America a Catholic continent simply because more than ninety percent of the people are baptized." He writes that "this judgment confuses the value of one's freely and consciously accepting the grace offered by Jesus Christ in the sacraments and substitutes a medieval or colonial manifestation of Christendom." He considers Latin America partially evangelized, but equally a continent for mission (1981:120).

I do not mean to imply that the "typical" Latin American that Dussel describes has the exact same mindset of the Spanish that arrived in the 16th century or the same understanding of Christianity as the indigenous people "baptized" by them.⁸ I am arguing, however, that Spanish Roman Catholicism, and the way it was introduced in Latin America, continue to have a huge impact on Latin Americans today.

⁷ 1. A few nourished a clear and conscious faith.

2. The great majority of church leaders and missionaries, some lay people, and native Americans mixed Hispanic and Christian elements as if they were identical.

3. The great majority of *conquistadores*, colonists, and Spaniards--along with the *Creoles* and later the *mestizos*--united completely the goals of the Spanish Empire with those of the Catholic Church. . . One was a Christian by virtue of being a Spaniard, of being baptized, and by observing certain precepts of the Church, but without any existential linking of conduct and the gospel.

4. The great majority of the Indians were baptized without being thoroughly catechized or genuinely converted. . . Their existential attitude on a moral or cultural plane, their faith and comprehension, were not sufficiently developed to allow them adequate understanding of Christian doctrine and its demands.

5. Some indigenous peoples remained relatively untouched by Christian missions.

6. Other, extremely isolated indigenous peoples "represented a marginal group isolated from the pre-Hispanic as well as from the Latin American civilization." (Dussel 1981:69).

⁸ Especially since, as I have just pointed out there was not a monolithic mindset.

IMPACT ON THE PEOPLE'S CONCEPT OF GOD

In biblical Christianity the act of fundamental importance in the relationships of humans and God is not a human act, but the gracious act of God in Jesus Christ. On the basis of that act the Holy Spirit is given, not earned. Christian action and ethical concern are responses to God's love, not a way to earn God's acceptance. The eucharist is a celebration and a reminder of what God has done.

The extreme importance given to rituals has contributed to turning all of this around. The emphasis is placed on human action that is seen as a means of earning something from God, or avoiding punishment. Stan Slade observes that this has spilled over into protestant churches even though they would teach against the Catholic rituals. He writes that many go to church simply hoping to please the strict distant God with their attendance. He explains that the people have the attitude that "God only takes care of those who make the sacrifice to attend all the worship services, the vigils, and the fasts" (1992:147,148).⁹ These same people would criticize, or feel sorry for, the people going on their knees to the Virgin of Guadalupe, but is their attitude toward God much different?

The hierarchy within the church, linking the church with the powerful state, and the moslem influence on the Spanish view of God all combine to facilitate the people perceiving God as distant and powerful. As we already observed, importance given to Mary and the saints as mediators is understandable in this context. Unfortunately it also reinforces the misconception of a distant, stern God.

WINDS OF CHANGE

There has been significant change, especially in the last thirty years, in relation to issues discussed in this section.¹⁰ The most radical changes, however, do not impact the majority.

Evangelicals, who have experienced tremendous growth in many areas in Latin America,¹¹ have worked to present a Jesus that lived and lives. Theologically bringing Jesus down off the cross and presenting him as a loving Saviour is an improvement. That in itself, however, does not completely correct the image of a distant accusing God that people carry deep within them.

Many Catholics have also developed an increased awareness of the Jesus who lived and lives. Partially this has happened simply by putting the Bible in the hands of lay people and training Celebrators of the Word to lead Bible studies. Liberation Theologians, and those sympathetic to that theology, have placed a great emphasis on Jesus' life and ministry. All of this has improved the situation. Yet, there is more to be done.

⁹ Many evangelical churches have meetings almost every night of the week.

¹⁰ See Escobar (1991).

¹¹ I do not by this statement mean to imply in a general way that Roman Catholicism is the problem and Evangelicalism is the solution in relation to this issue. Aspects of many forms of Evangelicalism brought to Latin America have reinforced mistaken concepts of God, or at best not corrected them. That, however, is material for another paper. I chose to address Spanish Roman Catholicism in this paper because of its foundational and universal significance in Latin America.

PART II: MACHISMO

Machismo could be described as an exaggerated awareness and assertion of masculinity which includes an emphasis on masculine virility and male superiority and domination over women. That definition does not, however, communicate the complexity nor the huge impact of machismo. This article does not allow space to enter into a full discussion of machismo. Instead, I will allow a Honduran, Elvia Alvarado, to give us a glimpse of her family and the world of machismo.

Elvia's father was a landless campesino who worked for big landowners as a day worker. Her mother raised chickens and pigs and baked bread to sell. This couple had five daughters and two sons. Often the father could not find work, and would spend the day drinking.¹² Elvia recounts:

Then he'd come home and pick fights with my mother and hit her with his machete. My mother would keep quiet when my father hit her. She knew that if she opened her mouth, if she dared to argue with him, he'd hit her more. But we kids would cry and scream and beg him to stop. My mother finally decided that she couldn't take such abuse any longer, and she left him when I was seven. After we left, my father moved to the coast. We never saw him again. (Alvarado 1987:1)

After he left, Elvia's mother "worked like a mule" and all the children helped. They'd get up at 3:00 AM to bake bread, make tortillas, feed the animals, clean house, etc. The boys sought work in the fields; the girls worked at home. By age seven they all were working. Her father had not let her older sisters go to school. "He couldn't see why girls needed an education, since they'd only go live with a man and have babies"(1987:2). After her father left, however, Elvia's mother sent her to school. She went from the time she was seven until she was twelve.

When Elvia was 13 her mother went to live with a man who refused to allow her to bring her children with her. Elvia went to live with her older brother who had a family of his own. At fifteen she started going out with Samuel and soon became pregnant. She recalls:

When my brother found out I was pregnant, he was furious. He said he was going to kill me. I hid in my older sister's house and he went there looking for me. When she told him I wasn't there he said, "OK. Tell that little slut that I'll be back, and that I'm going to get her with the six bullets I have left in my gun. Because I don't like what she's done to me." (1987:3)

Elvia fled. In many ways her children's experience would match her own.

Elvia's history supports Eugene Nida's observation that due to the father's behavior and/or absence, "the mother becomes the emotional center of the family, the one who provides the security and permanence so indispensable" (1974:62).¹³

¹² Alcoholism provides another example of the complexity of machismo. Many more men than women are alcoholics in Latin America. That implies a relationship between machismo and drinking. It would be simplistic, however, to say one causes the other. In fact, they feed off of each other.

¹³ In 1955 María Elvira Bermúdez interviewed 3,000 children in Mexico City. 32 percent could not give the name of their father (Nida 1974:60).

IMPACT ON THE PEOPLE'S CONCEPT OF GOD

Much of the impact of machismo on Latin Americans' concept of God relates to the way they experience authority which we will discuss in the next section. But besides being an authority figure, God is also commonly perceived as a male, as God the Father. This, in a society where for many, "the phrase 'I am your father' has no paternal flavor and is not said in order to protect or to guide another, but rather to impose one's superiority" (Paz 1961: 81). It is only natural that Latin Americans' experience with machoistic fathers will color the way they think of God.

In contrast to a mother (Mary) who is there for them, it would be easy to conceive of God as one who appears mostly to scold and give orders--or perhaps as one who never is there. People would easily imagine God as a Greek-type God, a strong one who is not moved to cry. Just as Elvia's mother thought it best to be quiet and endure, a person could attempt to appease this potentially violent God lest his next machete blow be aimed at her or him.

Our study of machismo adds to our understanding of the devotion to Mary. The two appear to feed off of each other--strengthening both. This connection is important for those who view the "Mary problem" simply as an issue of incorrect doctrine. Mary plays a significant role for those living with a distant, accusing, "machoistic" God. Correcting the situation must include dealing with the people's concept of God and hence also with machismo.

A more specific problem in relation to machismo arises for those who teach the traditional substitutionary theory of the atonement based on Anselm's thought. Anselm lived in an era when honor was an important issue. "To remit sin unpunished is not befitting of God." God must preserve "the honor of his own dignity" (Driver 1986:51). As Anselm understands it sin can only be forgiven if God's honor is preserved by the death of a sinless human. Jesus' death satisfies God. In any culture, presenting this as *the* reason for the cross can lead to people perceiving God as an angry demanding figure only appeased by Jesus.¹⁴ In Latin America many people would tend to relate any discussion of honor to machismo. Thus this presentation of the doctrine of the atonement could reinforce notions of a "macho" God. These concepts of honor and satisfaction also would easily lead people to relate God with other demanding authorities in their life. That is the focus of our next section.

PART III: EXPERIENCING AUTHORITY

Arguing for or against a universal Latin pattern of authority with identifiable causes is not my purpose. Rather I will focus on how people perceive and experience authorities in their lives, specifically in Honduras.

SOLDIER/POLICEMAN¹⁵

My parents taught me to go to a police officer if I were lost or needed help. In Honduras parents counsel children to go to the other side of the street when they see policemen

¹⁴ For a discussion of the diversity of biblical images of the Atonement see Driver (1986).

¹⁵ Soldiers and policemen are distinguishable entities in Honduras, but the difference is much less than in the United States. The police force is nationalized and under the military high command. Almost all the police are former soldiers. The police and the army wear different uniforms, but for the people FUSEP (police) and the army all come under the general category of *militares* (military). There is a very small contingent of female police. They are much less in the public eye because of numbers and the roles they fulfill. My observations refer to policemen.

approaching.¹⁶ People, even if innocent, develop a defensive attitude toward the intrusion of the police in their lives.

The army fosters fear, they might say respect, with an exaggerated display of their weapons. All police patrolling the streets carry M-16 rifles. Periodically the army and police will combine forces to combat crime in the city. Soldiers dressed for war drive the streets in vehicles mounted with M-60 machine guns. Patrols of two soldiers and two policemen walk the streets.

TEACHERS

In the typical Honduran classroom the teacher gives out the information, and the students memorize it. The teacher does not encourage students to ask questions. A student raising a point in disagreement with the teacher would be seen as disrespectful.¹⁷

When referring to grade school teachers, who are the only teachers most have, Hondurans more often talk in terms of the stern taskmaster who smacked their knuckles with a ruler than of a warm caring figure. Stan Slade observes that too often instead of motivating students in a positive manner teachers treat them as inferior beings using the tongue as a "verbal cat o' nine tails" (1992:153).¹⁸

POLITICAL LEADERS

The 19th century was the age of *caudillos* in Latin America. The *caudillo* through charisma, cunning, might, and bravery developed a group of followers who gave him allegiance. With the support of these followers he became the absolute authority in a given area.

Similarities are evident with today's political leaders. Political campaigns sell the person, not a program. Although Honduras elects its leaders, the spirit of the democracy differs from the United States. In many ways they elect a strong-man who both expects and is expected to rule. The congressmen and congresswomen are not viewed as representatives of the opinions of their constituents. Rather they are a way their constituents can connect with the benefits given out by the leader in power; they are a way to get a job in the government, to get a new school built, or to receive some other favor.

Few Hondurans know the president, the great majority have little hope of talking with a congressperson. When in need they will seek out the person they do know who is closest to the source of power hoping that person can influence someone higher up. Excitement fills the air after an election as people hope for jobs and other benefits. Naturally, there are not enough to please all the faithful, and disillusionment follows.

¹⁶ On this point I have African-American friends whose experience is closer to the Honduran than to my U.S. experience. That offers another example of the need not to generalize all this as a specifically Latin problem.

¹⁷ I have a friend that was kicked out of a high school because he told a teacher he thought the teacher had unfairly punished another student.

¹⁸ Other factors, besides a general hierarchical pattern of authoritarianism, probably produce this situation. For instance, one could argue that the teachers' disciplining with a ruler, dictating lessons, and emphasizing rote memory are simply elements of an older tradition in education. This model of education was not unique to Latin America. Poverty and a politicized educational bureaucracy may have as much to do with the slower pace of change in Honduras than does Latin American authoritarianism.

MILITARY OFFICERS

If you ask Hondurans what they think of military officers you will most likely get a strong response. In answering the above question people use words like the following to refer to the officers: abuse of authority, imposition, violent, unjust, and inaccessible; and to describe their feelings in relation to military officers they use words such as: fear, repugnance, hate, and lack of trust.

PASTORS

I do not want to generalize by saying that Latin American pastors play out the role of strong-man, or strong-woman, in their congregation. Although I have seen examples of authoritarian pastors I have also seen pastors who take a quite different approach. Others have authoritarian moments, but do not always take the strong-man approach.¹⁹ At the same time one could make a good argument that many Hondurans do experience strong or authoritarian pastors.

IMPACT ON THE PEOPLE'S CONCEPT OF GOD

Superiority, pride, and power typify the most common expressions of authority in Honduras. If people have experienced authorities who rely on intimidation and the use of force to back up their strict demands, what happens when these people come to church and are told that God is all-powerful, the Supreme Authority, the King of Kings? Most likely their experiences with authorities will influence the way they think about God.

Emphasizing God's power and authority will most naturally lead people to think of this all-powerful God as the *big* teacher, the *big* policeman, the *big* president etc.. People will tend to think of the power figures they know, magnify them and try to imagine what it would mean for this power, God, to be "good." If the authorities in their life have had an air of superiority that has made them unapproachable, God is likely to feel even more distant. If their teachers were strict and carried a ruler then, God will likely have a big accusing eye and a big stick. A Christian may feel less in danger of the stick than others, but the point is that the stick will be a significant part of their concept of this powerful God.

I am not saying that people person will automatically think of God as a corrupt, violent, general or politician simply because they are told God is powerful. People in church will also hear words of God's goodness and love. My thesis is that putting love and power together makes it difficult, if not impossible, for a Latin American to experience and understand the true reality of God's love.

PART IV: STEPS TOWARD A NEW CONCEPT OF GOD

¹⁹ Once again I am not arguing that this is a specifically Latin American problem. Much of what can be attributed to Latin American authoritarianism can be found elsewhere.

A number of elements, especially the three discussed in this article: Spanish Roman Catholic heritage, machismo, and experiences of authority, have led many Latin Americans, evangelicals included, to not truly experience God as a God of love. As Stan Slade has listened to Baptists in El Salvador pray, he has observed:

The brothers and sisters do not converse with a loving God who is present at every moment. They talk to a severe and distant God, one who is angry and vengeful. But in fact, they do not "talk" with him. They cry out to him from far away, pleading and begging for his mercy. They are not at all confident that the Lord hears them, much less that the Lord loves them. Just the opposite: it is necessary to win his favor. One must merit, must "become worthy," or, at least, "buy" his blessing. (1992:150)

Up to this point the purpose of the article has been to understand how people could perceive of God in this way--even while verbalizing that God is love. At this point, however, I want to move beyond that. It is one thing to observe Diego trying to sit still on Good Friday and ask how the "resurrection" spankings affected his concept of God. Now I want to reflect on how we can help him change that concept, and come to experience the depths of God's love. This section will take the form of a list of ideas--ways to attack this problem.

Jesus - God chose to become incarnate as a small town carpenter--not a figure of power and glory. We must call people to Jesus and say, this is how we understand what God is like. By emphasizing that Jesus is the way God chose to reveal Godself to us, we can say that Jesus shows us the concept of God that God desires us to have. If we do not see Jesus with a big stick and accusing eyes, we are wrong to conceive of God in that way. We should especially point people to situations where Jesus could have accused and condemned "bad" people (e.g. Luke 7:36-50; Luke 15; Luke 19:1-10; John 8: 1-11) and ask them how he differs from authorities in their lives. We should present the cross as the lens through which to think of God's glory and power.

God of Love in the Old Testament - People quickly come up with images of a wrathful God from the Old Testament. We can start to address this by looking at passages that state clearly how God's mercy is greater than God's anger and then attempt to read the Old Testament in that light.²⁰ We can point out that God's love and the covenant preceded the law. God's love is not conditional on human obedience even in the Old Testament.

Maternal Images of God - In any setting it is important to correct the error of imagining God as strictly male (or female). In Latin America it is especially important to show God is not a macho male. This needs to be addressed directly by placing more emphasis on biblical texts that use traditionally female imagery.

Machismo and Authoritarianism in the Church - A major thesis of this article has been that experiences in life give us many of the tools we use to develop a concept of God. A significant and necessary step then is to present people with different experiences. We must allow the Holy Spirit to breathe winds of renewal into the church that will change hierarchical leadership patterns, authoritarian strong-man pastors, and machismo.

²⁰ For further development of this idea see Baker (1993). Also Heschel (1962) and Yancey (1988) are helpful resources for this task.

Legalism and Rituals - As we saw, for the most part evangelicals in Latin America drop the outward form of ritual when they leave the Catholic Church. Many, however, carry the attitude with them and transfer it to new forms. This along with legalism, whose roots lie in the United States as much as in Spain, must be challenged, just as Paul stood to defend the Gospel in Galatians. In fact, reading Galatians would be a good place to start. Galatians offers the advantage of undermining legalism, individualistic Christianity, and racial, sexual, social and religious prejudices. It thus can liberate people to experience God's gracious love and to work for justice as a Christian community.²¹

History - Understanding the past facilitates taking steps of freedom in relation to that past. Most Latin Americans need to be more aware of the history of the conquest and their Spanish Roman Catholic heritage.

Atonement - As I suggested in the section on machismo, we must evaluate how we present the atonement. A way to begin would be using the diversity of biblical images related to the cross and the atonement and not feel we must present one single coherent theory that explains all.

Greek Connection - John Mackay's Spanish Christ is a helpful concept. We cannot, however, lay all the blame on the Spanish. Misconceiving God's most significant characteristics to be omnipotence and impassability predates the conquest and is a problem that crosses many borders. We must help Latin Americans understand that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God revealed in Jesus Christ, is not named Thor, and that the Christian's greatest desire is not a gnostic escape from the material world.

CONCLUSION

As presented in this article a fundamental problem has been emphasizing God's power and authority and hence linking God with Latin Americans' experience of human authorities. Therefore, although not listed as a separate category, implicit in a number of the ideas in this list is the need to place less emphasis on God's glory and power. Some will challenge that God is all-powerful, that the Bible speaks of his might and glory, and therefore it is un-biblical to de-emphasize these characteristics.

I make three responses. First, I would ask if the concept that comes to people's minds when we talk of God's power and authority derives more from the Bible or their experience. I would say the way many Latin Americans are presently thinking about God's power is un-biblical. Second, the Bible gives many characteristics of God. In a given context we can place emphasis on some more than others for pastoral reasons. That of course does not give license to totally leave out the others. Third, we must de-emphasize and reinterpret God's power and authority as God does in Jesus and even in the Old Testament. When I introduce a chorus of God's majesty and power in Latin America I ask people to think about the cross.

As the list of ideas shows, the aim is not just to de-emphasize talk of the all-powerful God, but also to emphasize the caring, compassionate God. This image must be continually reaffirmed--the distant accusing God must be dethroned.

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²¹ see Hays (1986).

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