

The future of AFI: The challenge of the church in Southamerica

By Carlos Mraida

We are being called on this occasion to think about our future as AFI, and its mission facing the church in each continent. It has been my turn to reflect on what the future of the church in our Latin American continent is and the challenge for us today.

When you pack your bag, do you think about the climate of the place where you live or the climate of the city where you are going? If you go to New York in the winter, even if I do not know where you are going, if I look at your suitcase I know you are going somewhere cold.

What is in our suitcase, in the church in South America, in the leadership of the church in South America? If someone comes today and opens the suitcase, what clothes does he find, the clothes we need to wear where we are or the clothes we need for the place where we are going? Where does God want us to go as a church?

Obviously answering this question far exceeds what I can say. I believe that God has to give us in meetings like these a prophetic perspective. So that noone misunderstands me, I understand the prophetic as an approximation that tries to reach a systemic understanding of the future, based on:

1. What the Word of God says, anticipates, prophesies.
2. Knowledge of the past. The past prophesies.
3. The recognition and understanding of the present, in such a way that helps us to draw tendencies and to project possible scenarios.
4. The revelation. What the Holy Spirit is speaking to the church more specifically in this time and in this context, announcing the newness that God is doing and will do. The Christian perspective does not accept determinism. We also believe in the new intervention of God in every moment of history. Amos 3.7: *Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.* And what is this prophetic exercise for? The prophetic is not to know the future just to anticipate, to adjust ourselves the best we can. It is not even primarily to plan better. The intention of the prophetic is the transformation of reality according to what the Word and Spirit are telling us.

The future does not appear, the future is created by us today. If there is representative leadership here, it is us who will determine much of the future of the church. We make this present creation of the future from what we believe, that is, from the theological perspective that we have, and from what we do, the missiological perspective. Both perspectives determine what we are today and what we will be.

Actually, I think we should talk about the futures of the church, rather than the future. We have to think about the 3 P's of the future. First, the possible future. Second, the probable future. And third, the preferable future.

I. The possible future:

In every moment of history and everywhere there are only two possible models of church. Jesus said: *Stop turning my Father's house into a market!* (John 2:16). The church as a market house is a church captive of the culture of its time, and therefore unable to transform its culture. Church is the corporate expression of a culture. Either we are an expression of the culture of the Kingdom, which is the Culture of the Father, or we are an expression of the culture of the market. In the discipleship of the new generations we will have to choose one of these two models. We are in the world, but we are not of the world.

When we confuse inculturation with cultural adaptation, we fall into cultural captivity, unable to transform reality.

II. The probable future:

Trends tell us that today the church in South America is shaping up more like a market house than as the Father's house. Some characteristics that I described more extensively in my presentation of a few years ago titled: *Kingdom, Church and Society*.

- The culture of the market is the narcissistic culture. This vision of reality has also affected believers with a self-centered religiosity, a Christianity without conversion, with a Christianity of self-help. Before we spoke of the converts, but today we speak of believers. Because people do not seek to change, but seek to feel good. That is why today we have 50% of the evangelicals all over the continent that do not congregate. And one of the causes is the disappointment that people suffer at the trials of life. Jesus anticipated it in the parable of the four lands. But it is the result of having been vaccinated from a self-centered gospel, and when God does not respond to my expectations, then I walk away.
- Market culture is the culture of hyperindividualism. Luc Ferry has called our time the age of "ultraindividualism", Pascal Bruckner has called it "superindividualism". Lipovetsky has described this period as the "second individualist revolution" or the passage of limited individualism to total individualism. And this individualistic perspective of faith leads to churches where people become attendees who come to have a private, intimate worship: "God and I." Hundreds of individuals worship in isolation without being aware of the other, without discerning the Body of Christ, and they come to seek individual blessings by making the Father's house, a market house.
But in the Father's house the worshipers worship the Father, as a family of the Father, well aware, that you can not love God, if you do not love your brother. The laws of the market emphasize the self, but God is us. The great problem of the church as a marketplace that affirms individualism is that the feeling of orphanhood deepens. Because we do not know the Father, and we do not live the experience of being the Father's family.
- The culture of the market is entertainment. Industry number one. Everything has to be fun. Preachers are no longer presented as men of God, but as dynamic communicators. People change church according to the platform show. When we turn the Church into the market house, we are only attendees.
- Today there is a great mobility of believers from church to church, according to the show they are given. We say: "I really liked worship, I did not like the pastor. Yes, it was good". Liked. It was good. These are the same phrases you use when you go to the movies or the theatre. This happens because the church is captive of the culture of the show. The culture of the show that the pastors promote to the people, focusing everything on the magical square meters, called platform. We show as lucky rockstars, who promote events, where singers are more important than those who bring the word and form people, where people define the church by what happens on the stage, and what 15 people do, and not for the life of community and the impact that that provokes in the city.
- The culture of the market is that of materialism. And that penetrated into the church. Preachers who on TV preach the gospel of prosperity, and that in order to reach it they manipulate people to give. When Jesus had to condemn idolatry, he did not speak of Baal, nor of Astarte, but of Mammon. And he said that you can not serve two masters. Because Mammon requires devotion, submission, religious obedience, change of message.
- Because Mammon takes advantage of my lack of emotional healing, and involves me in pharaonic projects, so that I feel that I am doing something great, that makes me feel what I am not feeling, important. And what follows is that the pharaonic project ends up consuming the ministry, and you have to stop being faithful to the message, because you have to talk about something else, to see if you raise the money for the project. It is not that they raise it for themselves. In most cases it is well-intentioned people who seek to fill their void, their lack of identity, their damaged self-esteem with achievements to which God did not call them.
- The culture of the market is that of consumerism. And consumerism is just a way of trying to fill gaps. Young ecstasy addicts tell us that their parents were consuming

things that never filled the void, so they decided to consume ecstasy to see if that filled them. And consumerism also came to the market house church. People come and seek to receive. "Bless me, give me, fill me, deliver me, give me the program I need, the cult that I like." This is called spiritual consumerism. But the church is not a dispenser that feeds consumerism, and it continues to leave people empty. As we were told last year by Eddy Leo: Dracula Christians, vampires, come to suck, and to demand more and more because they are never satisfied. And that's why they go from church to church. The House of the Market does not generate members of the body, but clients. The customer never has a pure commitment. The mentality of the customers is to go where they give the best quality at the lowest price. When that happens you have the customers, but when another one gives them a better service or a lower price, they change. But Jesus taught that you will never be satisfied until you give.

III. The preferable future:

It is the one that we must create today, with our decisions so that the church can be an expression of the culture of the Kingdom, and a House of the Father, not a house of the Market. And this is where all of us have a key role. Because if we do not disciple new generations according to that preferable future, we will only have the probable one. The one that unfortunately the trends are marking us, and more and more we will be house of Market.

1 Corinthians 12: 4-6: Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all.

The end of the 60s brought the recovery of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The 1990s brought the recovery of the five ministries of Christ from Ephesians 4. We have to be the generation that recovers the operations of the Father.

We are called to incarnate in our generation the fatherhood of God, doing the operations of the Father, that is, the works of the Father.

John 14:10-13: Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me, or else believe Me for the sake of the works themselves. "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father. And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

The passage tells us several things:

- The works of Jesus were those of the Father.
- The works of the Father made by Jesus demonstrated his perfect unity.
- Jesus left the Father, therefore He can not continue doing the works of the Father on earth. The work of the Father today is incarnated through the church, called to do the works of the Father.
- When the church manifests the Fatherhood of God, it does greater works than Jesus, because it completes his ministry, because the church is the fullness of Christ, his completeness.

The church is the fullness of Christ: (Ephesians 1:22-23).

And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

Christmas is the incarnation of Christ. Pentecost is the incarnation of the Holy Spirit. We need now, the incarnation of the Father.

The Holy Spirit was poured out in the last times for the church to incarnate the Fatherhood of God in the world, being the Father's House, and in this way to be able to perform the greater works, which are the operations of the Father. I believe that all of us have been entrusted with the greatest works, the incarnation of the Fatherhood of God.

It does not have to do with gifts, or with ministries, but with attitude. I have to show the Father's heart, with my gifts, with my ministry. We have to express the greater

works. Why are they greater? Because the greatest commandment is to love God and my neighbor. Because the most excellent way is the one of love, if I lack that, my wonderful gifts and my recognized ministry are like cymbals that only make noise. Because the greatest in the Kingdom is the one who becomes a child to relate to God as Father, so that he can express that fatherhood.

The works of the Father are the greatest, because the only thing the church can give the people that the world can not give is love, genuine interest in the other, listening, hugging.

Just some of the innumerable challenges for the church of our continent:

1. The challenge of ending in South America with the feeling of orphanhood in the life of the pastors once and for all. We all need ministerial paternity. We need to generate a pastoral network of all the pastors in each city. May we all have a pastor to turn to when we need it.
2. The challenge for the pastors of South America to be the people's parents again. No CEOs of religious multinationals, not showmen, but close parents of people who love and teach to live. Expressions of the Fatherhood of God.
3. The challenge of making our congregations Father's houses and not market houses. And that 50% of the believers who do not congregate today (in Argentina it is 66%) will return when the house is filled with the love of the Father.
4. The challenge of being ministering parents of young pastors, who feel like Solomon that his father David provides everything he has in his personal treasure to raise his son as king so that he can fulfill the mission by surpassing his father.
5. The challenge of Latin America being under the authority of the Heavenly Father, and not of protectors or mothers.
6. The challenge of raising a new generation of paternal leadership for Latin America, not paternalistic or populist, that teaches people the culture of effort, of work, as Luther did 500 years ago.
7. The challenge of strengthening the local congregation, so that it becomes an alternative community, the family of the Father. In South America, thanks to God, we have grown a lot in the consciousness of the Kingdom of God, and in countries like Argentina, there has been a lot of growth in the concept that there is only one church in every city. But the local congregation has been greatly hurt, especially among the younger generations. Enough of prophets of protest against the church, welcome prophets of proposals.
8. The challenge to a Latin America in need of transformation, which numbs people with entertainment making them spectators and not protagonists of changes, so that it does not reveal itself to unjust realities, to pastor the new generations in a constant discernment that helps us be an inculturated but not domesticated church. Enough of modern prophets and welcome transforming prophets. They should integrate technology, art, communications, as important elements to generate contact with the world today, but they should not use them for a show that makes Christians attendees but protagonists of a collective change, establishing the counterculture of the Kingdom and who make the church the house of the Father.
9. The challenge to a continent of absent parents and millions of orphans, to pastor the new generations in the Paternity of God, and the Church family of God, body of Christ, facing the individualistic, privatized and intimate, North Americanized and macdonalized non-biblical gospel. The whole Bible is written for a people, not for individuals. And we individuals can appropriate the promises that are there as long as we are part of that people. The church is the house of the Father, the family of God who heals the people of his orphanhood by connecting it with the Father and his family.
10. The challenge to a system that increasingly turns to the survival of the strongest and the "save who can", pastoring the new generations in a gospel not of self-help but of helping others. In Argentina, for example, to mentor more than 1,100,000 young people who today neither work, nor study, to eradicate the structural poverty of our nations, entrenched corruption in our society. The meaning of life is not in feeling good, but in fulfilling the transformational purpose of God.

May ours be the generation that recovers the operations of the Father, the greater works, ministries that embody the fatherhood of God and a church that will be the house of the Father to enthronize our God as Father in Latin America.

The essence of the gospel is the Fatherhood of God. God reveals Himself as Father. Jesus is the way to the Father. The Holy Spirit intercedes saying Abba Father. And the devil comes to us as the father of lies. Because paternity is the key to life. The root of all spiritual, emotional, material problems.

The greater works, the great revival that comes, the last revival, is promised to us when the heart of the parents turns to the children and the hearts of the children towards the parents.

If now we open the bag of the church today, we will not see the clothing of where we are going, but we will see that most of us are wearing the clothes we need where we are today. That is why today God wants to fill our bags with his paternity, because we are going to do the greatest works, the works of the Father.