

Genesis Teaches Maya Believers about the Character of God

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by Cynthia Klatt

It seemed an unlikely place to teach the Genesis account of creation. The village was peppered with 17 evangelical church buildings, enjoying proximity to a commerce town and the two Christian radio stations that preached on salvation incessantly. Besides, this was Guatemala, the country whose Evangelical community was estimated at an astonishing 32% in 1986, dropping to a still noteworthy 21% by 1992. And at first glance this village mirrored the statistics. The local pastors categorized 20% of the residents as Evangelical church attendees. What possible need could there be here for teaching the Old Testament creation account to a group of Mayan believers?

The Need to Start at the Beginning

My interest in teaching about creation and its chronological commencement of God's plan stemmed from working alongside Mayan rural churches from nearly every region of Guatemala. Whether they required a two hour walk from the end of the road, were tucked snugly in the northern rain forest or sitting at 9,200 feet overlooking the Pan American highway, most Mayan rural churches share a common predicament: they have largely been evangelized and nurtured on the New Testament. As a result, the characterization of the Bible's key players (God, Satan, angels and demons) can be insufficient and frequently defined by local traditions.

The sprawling village of San Miguel was no different. Over a period of eight months I walked a small group of believers, representing four churches, through the Genesis account of crea-

tion. For lessons I turned to Trevor McIlwain's (1987, 1988) *Building on Firm Foundations* series. With the storytelling approach and unrelenting emphasis on God's character, the lessons seemed ideal to help Mayan believers refine biblically the spiritual powers sharing their world. Prior to the start of the classes, the lesson examples and illustrations were retooled to fit a Mayan context.

For a number of reasons, San Miguel Christians had struggled in their attempts to rely on the Bible to challenge customary perceptions of God and the world around them. Here are some key factors.

Inadequate Bible Study

Although some men learned the pastorate from leaders already established in ministry, formal study has eluded most pastors in the last two decades. One result has been the use of local Christian radio as a substitute teacher and the means by which preachers learn their craft. The radio, however, is a teacher of few subjects, fine tuned to the preferences of its listening audience. In San Miguel, a pastor's spirituality is questioned should he stray from the community's favorite themes: repentance and salvation. A second result of not knowing how to study the Bible has been the misuse of Bible passages and a habit of teaching church rules instead of the Bible, all in an effort to underscore differences between churches. One church teaches the use of clothing with printed words evidences a person's unsaved status and warns people away from the offending congregations. Romans 3:10 ("there is none right-

eous, not even one") is used by some to claim the believer is not expected to do good deeds subsequent to salvation. More alarming is the "evolved concept" of salvation prevalent in the village. Natanael, an Evangelical with five years in the pastorate, points out that many use works to obtain salvation. A person is told to accept Jesus Christ and start working in the things of God to be saved. By doing activities like going to church services, fasting and praying, one starts to reach a transformation in life that results in salvation eventually.

I, too, thought this way a few years ago until someone patiently showed me what the Bible really says—that salvation is based on the past and perfect work and act of Jesus Christ, not on religious acts I do or anyone else does. Over time I began to realize why people do not want to accept Christ: It's because they do not present Jesus' perfect work correctly, rather they present the rules of the church and its traditions. So when people are invited to "accept Christ," in their minds that means follow certain rules. When a person leaves the Catholic church to become an Evangelical, in his mind he is changing religions by changing churches. The biggest difference between the two is that Evangelicals talk about leaving sins and vain things. Even though the Evangelical church talks more about Christ, it is a Christ that requires fasting, prayer, and attending church services to be saved. Grace is not understood correctly.

Language and Illiteracy

Living in San Miguel and shopping in the nearby town presses the resi-

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dents between two different languages: the trade language of Spanish and a particular dialect of the Quiché Mayan language (which dominates in the region). The Genesis Bible Study students brought both languages into the classroom. They insisted upon using the Spanish “King James” Bible but were not confident to extract meaning from it. For example, Azucena left school after third grade and one night, sitting before her cook-fire, read me a chapter from the book of Matthew, only to look up when finished and tell me she was unsure what the words meant. But at least she has a Bible. On the average, pastors in San Miguel calculate less than one quarter of their members own Bibles yet the preference for the trade language undermines the believers confidence to study the Bible for themselves.

Intermingling of Witchcraft with Evangelicalism

In this community of 6,200 people, witchcraft long preceded the establishment of the first Catholic or Evangelical church. Ubaldo is one of the few who openly claims no church affiliation. He has practiced witchcraft for over 25 years and, when pressed with the claims of Christ answers that he desires to leave witchcraft but has a long standing pact with Satan. “The very moment I leave witchcraft I’ll be killed because I’m in the hand of the enemy” he confesses. His association with churches (both Catholic and Evangelical) occur when their members seek his skill as a witch. In the Bible study group, approximately half of the students had an immediate family member who, at one time, had attempted to make witchcraft his or her profession.

Animism had also marked the religious community, demanding that elements of nature be petitioned and recompensed for their bounty to man. The land has to be thanked because it produces corn and food, therefore is holy and worthy of honor and adoration. Such beliefs partly defined local understanding

of the spirit world and traditions entrusted by past generations frequently avoided open examination by believers to see if they contradict Evangelical teaching. Sacred stones, believed to house spirits, are ritually passed from father to children. There is no way of knowing how old the stones are. But if someone treats them bad, something bad will happen to them. So instead, the stones are offered prayers, petitions, candles, incense and assorted gifts.

Genesis Study Gives New Perspective

Reminiscent of the US mail, the classes marched on through seasons of rain, flies, fleas and fog. But just before the rainy season descended again to start the next cycle, the last class arrived. Among the many truths learned, several were echoed by all the students.

Uniformly, each student expressed a long-standing curiosity about God which had gone unfulfilled in local churches. Orbelia stated, “

The Catholics think there is one God but they also worship other gods that created the universe. In the Evangelical church they preach there is only one God but what they have not taught us is that God is the powerful owner of all created things because only He existed at the beginning.

Azucena explained,

Here they’ll teach God created the heavens and the earth. But what was God like back then? The elders do not say. And how did God create the heavens and the earth? Because the elders do not explain these things, I did not know what God was like or how He created things like mountains, water and the sun. But now I do. For me it was important to learn that God had no beginning and will never have an end. A while ago, a friend was wondering how everything in the world came to be and I was able to explain about the God that designed it and made it all happen.

One pastor frequently used the lesson examples in his preaching, convinced they helped the women understand difficult aspects of God. I will ask, What did God use to put the sun in the sky? Did

He jump high? Did He use a ladder? And they tell me, God did it with His power; He’s God and He alone did it with His authority and His Word.

God’s One Plan for Mankind

As a pastor, Natanael was impressed by the wholeness of the Bible and God’s redemptive work.

The classes filled in a lot of answers for me. I never knew why God created the world. The majority of us never studied these aspects and the radio programs mostly preach repentance, conversion, salvation and traditions. But this is all new and important. I see now that what’s in the New Testament comes from the Old Testament; that the Bible is one whole book. I’ve studied the creation story but I did not know it linked with why Jesus Christ came. Cain and Abel, for example. I always thought it was just a story to illustrate how people lived back then. But now I see it’s related to the sacrifice of Christ and so I’m studying to see how other Old Testament stories do the same.

God’s plan for mankind eventually showed up in evangelism efforts. As Ignacio explained,

The lessons on creation helped in my witnessing. It’s like food: you need to combine various things to give it flavor. And so I begin by telling people how sin entered the world. After explaining how sin entered the world through Adam, I ask the person, So what’s the solution? We’re all sinners but for those who believe in Jesus there is a solution. Sin affected us all through one man but another Man came to our rescue. God’s superiority to Satan and demons.

Roberta spoke for many when she said,

In our area it’s taught that people are one of two spirits: the spirit of the enemy (Satan) or the spirit of God. Those with the spirit of Satan are the witches, the thieves and those who talk badly about others behind their backs. Those with the spirit of God are quiet, respectful people who walk slowly, do not laugh, do not wear jewelry and do not talk much. That’s what I used to believe. But when I started to really understand the Word of God it was like my head fell apart into many pieces, like a puzzle children play with. And now I know about the spirits. I understand that

God existed before the creation, making God stronger and wiser than all the angels. I also know that spirits are the angels that disobeyed God. Best of all, because God is greater than all the spirits, He can lead me out of the traps Satan places for me.

One couple had repeated contact with the local witch, Ubaldo. While Ubaldo has yet to believe God had superior power, the lessons led the couple to alter their perception of witchcraft. We can no longer see the work Ubaldo does as just a profession; the things he is involved in come directly from the devil. After a dream in which the wife was shown that Ubaldo remained blinded to the Word of God, she woke her husband to convey the urgency she felt for intercession. The next day, in another encounter with the witch, the husband related teachings compiled from the Bible study of Genesis: God created Satan as an angel and, even as a disobedient angel, Satan's power is not the power of God. The one true God has power to protect Ubaldo but he must leave Satan and return to his Creator.

Conclusion

The challenges facing San Miguel are not unique. My work with Mayan churches indicates many are negatively marked by factionalism, poor biblical understanding, inadequately trained pastors, witchcraft, and animistic influences among their members.

What is unusual is finding these and other elements all forcefully combined in just one area. Yet, in Guatemala, the Person and acts of the God of the Bible are crucial to believers whose animistic traditions remain largely unchallenged by Old Testament Scripture. The fact that gods and spirits exist is not questioned. But their character must be revealed through Scripture, and the creation account in Genesis helped do that. One student put it this way, "I would like to receive the lessons again, the very same ones, because I think I'll learn even more. The words will mean more to me and my mind will hold stronger on to these truths about God in His Word."

Bibliography

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