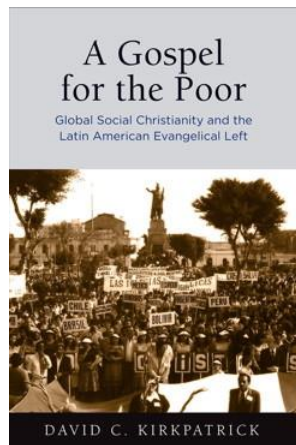


## BOOK REVIEW

# A Gospel for the Poor: Global Social Christianity and the Latin American Evangelical Left

By David C. Kirkpatrick

Reviewed by Andrew L. Williams



Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, \$55.00

This monograph provides a detailed and intricate look into one of the most important Christian developments in the latter portion of the 20th century: the emergence of an Evangelical Left in Latin America and the influence of its *misión integral* (“integral mission”) on international evangelicalism more broadly. In the immediate aftermath of WWII, Carl F. H. Henry lamented a fundamentalist/evangelical retreat from social issues in his book, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. Prominent Western evangelicals such as John Stott and the Berlin Congress on World Evangelization (1966) illustrated this retreat by espousing the primacy of evangelism over social concerns.

In that context, Latin American evangelical leaders grew wary of a gospel of the wealthy and its lack of interest in economic and political structures that perpetuate oppression, racism, and poverty. At issue, in the simplest terms, was (and is) whether social action is inherently part of the gospel or is only an implication of the good news. Beginning with the role of Global South leadership at the 1974 Lausanne Congress, Kirkpatrick reviews the growth of a Christian movement that sought a more robust and balanced theology. What they would

produce, referred to as integral or holistic mission, would become standard evangelical language within a few decades.

To some degree, the story of this book is about navigating boundaries with the purpose of articulating a theology that is both faithful to the biblical witness and carefully contextualized. Ideologically, Latin American evangelicals sought a middle way between Marxism and right-wing politics of the U.S. church and its missionaries. Theologically, leaders such as Míguez Bonino and René Padilla navigated the border of ecumenical (Left leaning) and evangelical (Right leaning) groups within Latin America. Relationally, Samuel Escobar, Padilla, and others functioned as liaisons between the Latin American body of Christ and Christian leaders external to the continent.

This book makes many valuable contributions to our understanding of Christian relief, development, and advocacy, three of which are discussed here. First, it offers an example of the important fruit born by contextualizing church and theology. One practitioner quoted in the book says that Christian humanitarians and missionaries needed to “up our game” theologically (161). The evolution in one element of global church relations, between Latin America and Europe/North America, that Kirkpatrick’s research captures is a compelling corrective in the continued struggle with Western cultural and theological imposition and blindness. Lamin Sanneh is an example of a prominent missiologist who explored similar themes. Second, Padilla, Escobar, and others show that the Kingdom of God transcends political ideology (Left or Right; Communist or Capitalist). Though the term “Left” in the title may suggest otherwise, the theology and ministry of *misión integral* is neither partisan nor in the service of a particular political agenda—an important reminder in our age. Third, for scholars interested in themes related to Christian humanitarianism, as well as Latin American Christianity or theology, this book is an intricate, perhaps definitive, record of one important movement. The extensive use of archival research and substantial documentation of secondary sources will

likely constitute a lasting reference for the academic community.

*A Gospel for the Poor* raises the ever-present question of discontinuity versus continuity in historical analysis. Thankfully, Kirkpatrick is aware of the complexity of the record. Even though his book sides principally with discontinuity or the innovation of *misión integral*, in numerous instances he acknowledges that the concepts at the heart of it are not novel to the Latin American Evangelical Left in the 1960s and 70s. For example, he calls into question the historiography of the “Great Reversal,” or the fundamentalist/social gospel split in the early 20th century, by pointing to the more holistic theologies of the Black Church and female missionaries. Yet, despite a few contrary examples, Kirkpatrick places a significant onus on readers to hold the complexity of the historical narrative together. For instance, the book has relatively little to say about the post-World War II explosion of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) that was deeply influenced by Christians concerned about poverty and oppression; and that included the creation of evangelical organizations such as World Relief (1944), World Vision (1950) and Compassion International (1952). Brian Woolnough, a scholar of Christian relief and development, uses the language of holistic mission to discuss post-war Christian humanitarian NGOs. Another example is provided by Latin American Catholicism, which is more nuanced than the dichotomy of Liberation Theology, on the one hand, and support of hierarchy and despotism, on the other. In fact, the via media of the Latin American Evangelical Left is similar in approach and analysis to such encyclicals as *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931).

Additional questions, theological in nature, are close to the surface throughout the writing. Several come more clearly into focus in the discussion of the Emerging Church’s connection to Padilla and integral mission. Is *misión integral*, as Brian McClaren asserts, a “different theological ecosystem” that moves away from an emphasis on penal substitutionary atonement (164)? Would McClaren or Padilla give no priority to eternal or spiritual over temporal, terrestrial, or social ends? In addition, *misión integral* follows a more optimistic, or “realized,” eschatology. By way of illustrative contrast, “Christian realism” (e.g., Richard Niebuhr), which played a major role in post-war neo-liberalism, was more skeptical of human institutions and structures—a view influenced by the failure of the League of Nations to prevent either WWII or the Holocaust. Are Christian realism and integral mission different emphases or incompatible ecosystems? One could also ask about the theological categorization of Latin American figures such as Padilla and Bonino. Kirkpatrick, who raises that question in various ways,

partially answers it by noting that Padilla became increasingly ecumenical and Bonino increasingly evangelical over time (133).

The conclusion, which feels too rushed, begins with the dichotomy of Jim Wallis and Al Mohler, and the former’s assertion that he has more in common with global Christianity than with American evangelicals like Mohler. Yet, in some segments of the Global Church and with certain issues (including some “social issues”) Mohler’s evangelicalism is a much closer fit abroad. A better inquiry may be to probe the limits of terms like “evangelical” and “ecumenical,” or “left” and “right,” especially across geographies and decades.

We should be grateful to Kirkpatrick for excavating this history and raising such questions. All told, this is a terrific resource that works hard to tell an important story accurately. I highly recommend *A Gospel for the Poor* to practitioners, scholars, and students.

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