

Opening Address at the World Evangelical Alliance, Sao Paulo, Brazil¹

Justin Thacker

Last year in my country, the United Kingdom, thousands of churches came together in villages, towns, and cities to run programs for the poor. They ran soup kitchens for the homeless, they helped the jobless find work, they loved and cared for alcoholics and drug addicts. In total, over a million hours of community service were performed by Christians. And it happened because of two Latin American theologians. Their names: René Padilla and Samuel Escobar. I think you will have heard of them. What Padilla and Escobar did over thirty years ago at the First International Congress

¹ This address was given at the World Evangelical Alliance Consultation “Evangelical Theology: Ways and Means in Latin America,” in Sao Paulo, Brazil, July 22-25, 2009. It was the opening plenary address presented by Justin Thacker who at the time was the Chairman of the World Evangelical Alliance Theological Commission.

Dr. Justin Thacker is a former medical doctor turned theologian. At the time of giving this talk, Dr. Thacker was Executive Director of the World Evangelical Alliance Theological Commission. He is auditor/editor of three books, the most recent of which is *Micah's Challenge: The Church's Responsibility to the Global Poor*.



on World Evangelism in Lausanne led directly to the expressions of Christian service that my country witnessed last year.

And that is why I am excited to be here in Sao Paulo today. To put it simply: as far as I can see, frequently it is the case that Latin American theologians lead, and the rest of the evangelical world follows. It is the case that Latin American theologians lead, and the rest of the evangelical world follows. So what I hear today will influence what we in the British evangelical scene will be doing tomorrow.

Let us return for a moment to the impact of Padilla and Escobar. In 1974, evangelicalism was not sure whether social concerns were also gospel concerns. There were many Christians who said that the gospel of Jesus Christ had nothing to do with the material conditions of people's lives. The gospel was a spiritual matter alone. Padilla and Escobar disagreed. Because they were brave and willing to voice their disagreement, they changed the nature of world evangelicalism.

I work for the British Evangelical Alliance. About a year ago, we found in some hidden away box the original participant's folder that our general secretary took to the Lausanne congress in 1974. His name was Gordon Landreth, and he had written in pencil his thoughts on Padilla's and Escobar's papers. In relation to Padilla, he wrote: "A terrific paper! Many things that needed saying and have been said well." And in relation to Escobar, he commented: "A helpful presentation that moves courageously to ask some difficult and searching questions of Western evangelicals."

So what was it that Padilla and Escobar said to provoke this response? René Padilla, in his plenary address "Evangelism and the World" wrote:

There is no place for statistics on "how many souls die without Christ every minute" if they do not take into account how many of those who thus die, die victims of hunger. There is no place for evangelism that, as it goes