

## **Ministering to Women in Latin Cultures**

By Susan Bixby, missionary wife in Monterrey, Mexico for 10 years; missionary kid from Chile

### **Introduction regarding culture**

Before we get into the meat of this session, I would like to preface it with a brief discussion about culture and human nature. Without getting into a study on anthropology (about which I would definitely NOT be qualified to speak!), I believe it is beneficial for us to remember that for every woman born into this world, her greatest problem is herself, her sin nature. Exacerbating this problem is the fact that she is born into a sinful world full of people with the same problem she has. As each person develops physically, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually, her culture creates “notches” (or ruts or pegs) in her brain.

So what is “culture” anyway? If we’re saying that culture affects us to such an extent, we need to understand exactly what we are referring to. There are dozens of definitions for the word culture, and several basic meanings. In this context, I believe a good definition for culture is the following (compiled from definitions found on Wikipedia): *the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another; also referring to the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group.*

Let’s face it—every one of us has a particular outlook on life, a perspective of right and wrong or acceptable and unacceptable, and even a conscience that is, at least in part, derived from and formulated by our culture. Why is this important for a single missionary or a missionary wife to understand? Hopefully a missionary goes to a field with the goal of reaching the nationals with the Gospel message, and ministering to them in their spiritual growth. It is essential for that missionary to understand that she herself is influenced greatly by her own culture, as are the people to whom she reaches out. She has her own notches and pegs and ruts that influence her perspectives and opinions. This means she needs humility, flexibility, knowledge of Scripture, and an abundance of every one of the fruits of the Spirit! Let’s look at some examples of why we can go wrong in this area, and then talk about some specific cultural differences regarding Latin America. We’ll finish with a reminder of what God has to say about women and His will for them.

#### **1. Missionary Madness—Americanizing the nationals.**

As “mad” as it may seem to some of us, there have been trends in missions that teach the “Americanization” or “westernization” of nationals as an essential part of missions work. Even for missionaries that would not agree with this being practiced in extreme ways, this type of mindset is very common (though often unintentional) even among conservative missionaries and can effectively debilitate the work of the Gospel. I believe that every missionary will work through these types of issues at some point in his/her ministry to foreigners. Particularly as women, we tend to get hung up on “stuff” more than men, so this is especially important for us. (That’s not a scientific observation!—just my opinion based on personal observations and

experiences.) I would like to mention two fundamental judgment mistakes that I personally have made, and I believe are common struggles for missionary women.

**a. Failure to distinguish between spiritual and cultural issues.**

We must be constantly evaluating our own practice and obedience to Scripture and have utmost confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture and the Holy Spirit to convict people of sin and show them where they need to change. Making African nationals think they have to dress like Americans in order to please God is mishandling the teaching of the Word, and is not true to the message of the Gospel. At best, it distracts from it. It encourages legalism. We must plead with the Holy Spirit to give us wisdom and love to not judge others for things that in our little “American brain notches” register as “wrong” or “unchristian.” We need His guidance to discern between spiritual and cultural issues, and focus on what really matters for the sake of the Gospel. It also helps to understand that for many believers, the “cultural” preferences we’re referring to here may not come from the American culture in general, but potentially from the particular “Christian culture” the believer grew up in or was immersed in after being saved. It is particularly important for a missionary woman to understand that the preferences her “preacher daddy” was so adamant about may not be the essence of Christianity after all, and the Brazilians or Mexicans or Bolivians can be “good Christians” without adhering to those things.

**b. Failure to see people’s real problems.**

Related to the above point, but noteworthy as a separate point nonetheless, is that focusing on things that are more prevalent (or obvious) in our host culture, even if they *are* wrong, can blind us to or distract us from a person’s true need. For example, I can get distracted by the fact that my Mexican sisters in Christ do not separate themselves from the world in the area of dress. More than conservative Christians in the States, they are greatly affected by their culture/society in this area. At least from my own experience in Mexico, they literally don’t “get it”. I say this because I know some of these ladies very well, they talk to me about their struggles and I see their spiritual growth. Is this an issue of obedience to Scripture and personal holiness for them? Yes. Is their greatest spiritual need for me to confront them constantly about their dress? Normally not. So if I make it the biggest issue, I misrepresent the Gospel to them, and fail to truly help them. This is a very broad topic that would certainly be worthy of its own session, but I wanted to touch on it because our view of the Gospel and the Christian life will greatly affect how we handle cultural differences and sensitive issues. I also have personally observed how missionaries deal with nationals and their “sin issues” in many different ways and the devastating effects some of these methods can have on the spiritual lives of those people. What the Lord has taught me in this area is that I need to trust His Holy Spirit to convict people of sin, while at the same time speaking the truth in love and teaching His Word faithfully.

With this being said, I believe most of you probably understand that cultural differences vary greatly worldwide. It is normally possible to group different countries and cultures together and talk about some of their general characteristics. This is what I would like to do in the next section. When I refer to Latin America, I refer mostly to Central and South

America, also including Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. Not all of the things we'll talk about are true of every country, but in general can be helpful to understand. Based on surveys that I conducted of missionary wives in Latin American countries, and my own experiences in Chile and Mexico, I have categorized what I believe are the biggest cultural differences regarding family, society, and the church between the U.S. and Latin Americans in general, and also what I believe could be the greatest challenges for missionaries and missionary wives desiring to reach out to these people.

## 2. **Minimizing Misunderstandings in Latin America**

- a. **Family**—Latin Americans in general highly value family and tend to have more tight-knit extended family relationships than Americans do. On the surveys sent to missionary wives serving in LA countries, “family” was the #1 answer to the question, “What are the most important values for women in the society in which you minister?” This is likely due primarily to the fact that extended families often live very close to each other and interact more. It is hard to separate family from society, so in the society section we will deal with some things not directly related to family.
  - i. *Matriarchal society*—LA cultures are known to be matriarchal. This basically means that Mom or Grandma runs the show. Momma’s opinion matters more than anybody else’s, even after the child is grown and has a home of his/her own. Obviously, you can imagine an endless number of ramifications of this on the extended family as the children form their own homes. The elderly mother can be very demanding of her adult children, letting them know that she deserves their money and care because of what she invested in them.
  - ii. *Marriage*—Men are very “machista” (a sense of worth based solely on being male and the need to prove manliness by dominating women; the repudiation of all “feminine” virtues such as kindness, truthfulness, & unselfishness because these qualities show weakness). But these same men normally fail to take true leadership. The husband generally just wants the wife to do what he says and have his food, clothes, and house taken care of. Often “Mommy’s boy” can’t cut loose from his mom even after marriage. He has likely been spoiled into thinking he should do nothing around the house. In some places, having a mistress is culturally acceptable, and the wife is supposed to just continue with her duties. Wives are often not trusted with money and have to ask for every little bit. This contributes to a culture of manipulation and lying in the marriage. Wives do not respect their husbands.
  - iii. *Kids*—Most Latin American homes are very child-centered. Once the first child arrives, the marriage normally takes second place (at least in the eyes of the woman). Parents have a hard time viewing their children as sinners, even after becoming Christians. Child-rearing consists greatly in different forms of bribery; therefore lying to kids is common. There is practically no consistent discipline whatsoever, but lots of yelling and even beating during the parent’s temper tantrum.

Boys are often very spoiled, very dependent on mom. Dad won't allow them to help with housework.

Kids are raised to value material possessions, because most parents in the current generation are desperate to have their children avoid the suffering and "deprivation" they endured. "I want my kids to have what I didn't" is one of the primary child-rearing goals.

Kids' view of God is affected by their view of a distant, un-caring, selfish father.

## b. Society

- i. *Hierarchical*—In these cultures, authority figures are almost worshipped, and often receive unquestioning obedience. Positions are very important, and it is typical to have lots of ceremony recognizing and honoring those in leadership. Women are less important in general—especially in rural areas and poorer countries. Men's opinions are more valued. It's all about WHO you know! Connections are extremely important and useful.

- ii. *Interpersonal Relationships*

1. **Appearance matters most.** This is seen in many areas, even in the way they construct and decorate their homes and buildings. Facades are very common. But particularly with interpersonal relationships, the almost desperate pursuit of putting on a good face results in a lot of lying, flattery, materialism (stealing or deceiving to gain something or appear more prosperous). Women want to be seductive because their bodies are what make them worth something (since their intellect is often not appreciated). Example: Plastic surgeries are multiplying exponentially in large Latin American cities. I know of women who have received multiple plastic surgeries while still very young (right after having their first baby, for example), and quite a few older women as well. Plastic surgery is a common gift for a girl turning fifteen.
2. **Non-confrontational.** Continuing with the idea of appearance being the most important thing, Latin Americans (there are some exceptions to this in countries that have more European influence) don't want to be the "bad guy" in any way. Friends will easily lie to friends just to avoid confrontation or negative feelings. In business dealings and other contexts, it is very common to have no idea who may or may not be lying to you, and to find that the promised outcome never happens. Often you will discover the person knew they couldn't fulfill the promise, but didn't want to look bad by saying no.  
But on the flipside of this coin, . . .
3. **Open and blunt** about certain things. This seems like a contradiction to the previous point, but to Americans the Latin Americans can be rude and too personal in certain areas. They speak openly about whether a person is fat or skinny or has gained weight. I have been asked a number of times by complete strangers if I want to have more children and if I am taking the birth control pill to avoid it. These things can be offensive to an American missionary, but are completely normal to some LA's.

To Latin Americans (at least some) the American way of getting right to the point and not taking time for social pleasantries and greetings is offensive. It is good for missionaries to get into the habit of slowing down and making a point to enjoy the social “demands” that society places on them in a foreign country.

**c. Church (Christian life)**

- i. *Pastor*. As a result of the hierarchical worship of authority, a pastor is often seen as incapable of doing wrong. Churches are often run as dictatorship. The people can be easily manipulated by the pastor because of their unquestioning loyalty. Christianity can easily be about a man instead of being Christ-centered.
- ii. *Catholicism*—Largely due to years of Catholic influence, legalism permeates every area of life. Catholics live their lives centered around the belief that behavior is what will gain or lose favor with God and blessings on this earth. Their view of God distorted. As Americans we have a hard time understanding the extent to which a religion can influence the development of a culture.

I strongly urge you—if you find you are going to a Latin American country as a missionary—to do some research on Catholicism and its effects on the culture of that country.

We all have a legalist inside of us, but for someone whose cultural and family roots have been in Catholicism for so long, it is particularly challenging to change the mindset. A missionary who comes in and over-emphasizes externals can actually lead new believers right down the same path of legalism their families have been following for centuries.

iii. *Family repercussions due to conversion*:

1. **Baptism** equals treason to your own *culture* and/or *family* in some places. It is a big step of faith.
2. **Extended family feels replaced by church**—They reject or pull away from the new believer. Legalism causes new converts to often be judgmental and push family away even more.
3. **Unsaved husbands** often resent the church and do not want the wife to attend. Most LA churches are made up of a majority of women. Men don't need religion—in their “machista” society it would show weakness to “need” God. Because of how they view their wives almost as servants, their needs aren't getting met the way they would like (maybe lunch is later that day), so they prohibit the wife from leaving the house to attend services. In part because of the legalism that carries over easily into conservative Baptist and Bible-believing churches, pastors emphasize frequently that attendance at every service is part of being a good Christian. This creates a difficult predicament for wives who have a genuine desire to submit to and reach their husband for the Lord, and still be a “good Christian.”

It can be very challenging to keep our perspective straight when facing so many challenges and often confusing issues. The following truths have helped me keep my

perspective straight—focused on the word of God, the Gospel—when other things don't seem to quite line up.

### 3. Maintaining Gospel Paradigms

- a. **God's design for women** applies across all cultures. I must be a student of the Word and know what God's will is for ALL of His children. I want to strive to help the ladies to whom I minister seek sanctification in every area of their lives in order to truly bring glory to God.
- b. The greatest need of any human is **a relationship with God**—this is the key relationship in every woman's life. This is particularly important to emphasize in a culture where relationships are highly valued. Where acceptance and appearances are so important, God's acceptance of us based on the work of Jesus Christ frees us from slavery to men.
- c. **Conviction of sin** or the need for change is **the Holy Spirit's work**. This applies to our tendency to judge, jump to conclusions, or think we know what the problem is.
- d. **Questions** to ask when dealing with women from other cultures:
  - i. What is her real/true problem or need?
  - ii. What un-biblical thinking patterns is she displaying and what truth can I share with her to combat that particular lie?
  - iii. Is this a cultural and/or a spiritual issue? Am I attempting to “fix” something that doesn't really need fixing? Or am I attempting to fix a symptom instead of finding the real problem?
  - iv. How is my own prejudice, opinion, or pre-conceived notion affecting my perspective or judgment on this issue?
  - v. How would Jesus deal with this person?

Latin American people are some of the most lovable people on earth. Because they value relationships so much, they are wonderful friends to fellowship with and work with. What a privilege it has been for me and my family to have worked among them for so many years. May God give us wisdom to humbly live among them as His servants proclaiming His truth and seeing changed lives!