

Middleton and Wright Have We Loved, but Padilla and Escobar? North American Eschatologies and Neglected Latino Voices

Miguel G. Echevarria, Jr.

Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

In the 1960s and 1970s, Latino Theologians C. René Padilla and Samuel Escobar reminded the global Christian community of Jesus's holistic mission: that he came to save people from the painful effects of sin, such as injustice and oppression, so that they might flourish under his earthly rule. Their message was dismissed by North American evangelicals who were more concerned about delivering souls into heaven. Since then, American evangelicals have come to appreciate holistic eschatology, which is analogous to holistic mission, in the works of J. Richard Middleton and N. T. Wright. Thus, there is no reason to continue to disregard the arguments of Padilla and Escobar.

Key Words: Escobar, good news, gospel, holistic eschatology, holistic mission, kingdom, Padilla

The 1960s and 1970s marked the rise of Latino evangelical voices. David C. Kirkpatrick notes that during this time the “emerging generation” of Latinos “developed, branded, and exported” their brand of Christianity “to a changing coalition of global evangelicalism.”¹ As a result, evangelicals were introduced to the likes of René Padilla, Samuel Escobar, Orlando Costas, and José Míguez Bonino.² Two of the most influential were Padilla and Escobar, whose ideas spread through their many publications, international speaking engagements, and teaching appointments at colleges and seminaries in the United States. Padilla, for instance, published

the notable *Misión integral: Ensayos sobre la iglesia y el reino*, which is available in English under the title *Mission between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom of God*.³ He also spoke frequently in his work for International Fellowship of Evangelical Students and the Latin American Theological Fellowship and held professorial appointments at institutions such as Wheaton College. Escobar published the popular *New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone* and *En busca de Cristo en América Latina*, which was translated into English as *In Search of Christ in Latin America: From Colonial Image to Liberating Savior*.⁴ He also spoke regularly as General Director of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship of Canada and held professorates at Palmer School of Theology (formerly Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary) and Facultad Protestante de Teología in Madrid, Spain.

What likely propelled Padilla and Escobar onto the world's scene was the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, of which John Stott was the key architect.⁵ At Lausanne, they gave main plenary sessions and were granted a platform along with North American evangelical leadership—seizing the opportunity to promote their message of “holistic

³ C. René Padilla, *Misión integral: Ensayos sobre la iglesia y el reino* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); *Mission between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985). A sample of Padilla's other works are *Economía humana y economía del reino de Dios* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Kairós, 2003); “Misión integral y evangelización,” *Iglesia y misión* 71–72 (2000): 34–39; “Lo de Dios y lo de Cesar,” *Certeza* 41 (1970): 2–3; “Una nueva manera de hacer teología,” *Misión* 1.1 (1982): 20–23; “The Fullness of Mission,” *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 3.1 (1979): 6–11; “The Kingdom of God and the Church,” *Theological Fraternity Bulletin* 1–2 (1976): 1–23.

⁴ Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone*, ed. John Stott (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003); *En busca de Cristo en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Kairós, 2012). See also his “Biblical Content in Anglo-Saxon Trappings in Latin American Theology,” *Occasional Bulletin of the Latin American Theological Fraternity* 1.3 (1972): 1–11; “The Whole Gospel for the Whole World from Latin America,” *Transformation* 10.1 (1993): 30–32.

⁵ Grant Wacker notes also Billy Graham's influence on this “extra-ordinarily influential conference,” in which he sought to empower “both sexes” and “multiple nationalities” (*America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014], 229). At the conclusion, its organizers, including Graham, signed the Lausanne Covenant, which boldly stated: “We affirm . . . justice and reconciliation throughout human society for the liberation of men and women from every kind of oppression. Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God . . . nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty” (Wacker, *America's Pastor*, 244).

¹ David C. Kirkpatrick, *A Gospel for the Poor: Global Social Christianity and the Evangelical Left* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2019), 14.

² Such theologians stand on the shoulders of Latinos who came before them, such as Gonzalo Báez-Camargo (1899–1983), Alberto Rembao (1895–1962), Angel M. Mergal (1909–1971), and Domingo Marrero Navarro (1909–1960). Samuel Escobar calls these men the “founding generation,” who “in their effort to contextualize faith they rediscovered the humanity of Christ and the social dimension of the gospel, yet they maintained the basic framework of traditional evangelical Christology” (*In Search of Christ in Latin America: From Colonial Image to Liberating Savior* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2019], 90).

mission.”⁶ Christians from around the globe therefore heard an important reminder: that Jesus came to save whole people, body and soul, from the painful effects of sin, so that they might experience fullness of life on earth.⁷ The framework through which they presented their message was the “already-not yet” view of the kingdom popularized by George Eldon Ladd.⁸ Through this grid, they argued that Jesus’s arrival signifies the kingdom is “already” present, initiating the process of redemption from sinful effects such as poverty, injustice, and oppression. Though the kingdom has “not yet” arrived in full, the course of salvation will continue until humanity experiences resurrection, at which time God will transform the earth, ushering in a permanent reign of justice, peace, and love. Though the “already-not yet” eschatological paradigm is now common among evangelicals, in Padilla’s and Escobar’s day theologians were still trying to reconcile the “present” and “future” ramifications of the kingdom.⁹

In the 1960s and 1970s, their emphasis on holistic mission flew in the face of (what many Latino theologians call) an “American gospel,” which stresses that Jesus came to deliver souls into heaven, with little mention of how salvation affects embodied lives in the present.¹⁰ In response, Padilla argues: “A comprehensive mission corresponds to a comprehensive view of salvation. Salvation is wholeness. Salvation is total humanization. Salvation is eternal life ... life that begins here and now ... and touches

⁶ The original Spanish term, which Padilla coined, is *misión integral*. Other than “holistic mission,” some also translate *misión integral* as “integral mission.”

⁷ I will not argue for dichotomist or trichotomist views of persons. I use “body” and “soul” in reference to the “material” and “spiritual” aspects of human beings.

⁸ A glance through their works reveals strong echoes of George Eldon Ladd’s *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); and *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990). Another important influence regarding the “inbreaking of the kingdom” is Oscar Cullman’s *The Christology of the New Testament*, trans. Shirley C. Guthrie and A. M. Hall (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963).

⁹ See an overview of this debate in Ladd, *Presence of the Future*, 3–42; Patrick Mitchell, “New Testament Eschatologies,” in *The State of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research*, ed. Scot McKnight and Nijay K. Gupta (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 224–35.

¹⁰ For a thorough understanding of the social, political, and religious context out which holistic mission emerged, see Kirkpatrick, *A Gospel for the Poor*; Sharon E. Heaney, *Contextual Theology for Latin America: Liberation Themes in Evangelical Perspective*, Paternoster Theological Monographs (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008).

all aspects of man’s being.”¹¹ This message is grounded in the person and work of Jesus, who fulfills the role of Isaiah’s suffering servant by taking the people’s sins upon himself, on the cross, making them righteous before the Father and the first fruits of a new creation (Isa 40–66; cf. Luke 4; Matt 5).¹² As a result, Jesus’s kingdom has come, satisfying centuries of biblical expectations.¹³ While each had their own theological nuances and agendas, woven throughout Padilla’s and Escobar’s work is a “holistic” message based on the “whole” counsel of God. Using contemporary models, their “already-not yet” holistic message, which relies on the progressive nature of Scripture, is in line with a redemptive historical approach to biblical theology.¹⁴

A closer look at Padilla’s and Escobar’s holistic mission reveals that it bears a striking resemblance to a recent theological movement called holistic eschatology. Prominent examples are J. Richard Middleton’s *A New Heavens and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology*¹⁵ and N. T. Wright’s *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* and *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.¹⁶ Both Middleton and Wright

¹¹ Kirkpatrick (*A Gospel for the Poor*, 11) quotes John Stott, “The Significance of Lausanne,” *International Review of Mission* 64.255 (July 1975): 289.

¹² Padilla notes that for Escobar the suffering servant motif was essential for holistic Christian mission (C. René Padilla, “Hacia una cristología evangélica contextual,” *Boletín Teológico* 30 [1988]: 98).

¹³ Padilla, *Mission*, 65.

¹⁴ See Edward W. Klink III and Darian Lockett’s discussion of the redemptive historical approach to biblical theology, which they call BT2 (*Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012]), 59–75).

¹⁵ J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014). Tim Keller’s *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008); and *A Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Penguin, 2010) are examples of popular works through which runs the theme of holistic eschatology.

¹⁶ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008); *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003). See also Wright’s “New Heavens, New Earth,” in *Called to One Hope: Perspectives on Life to Come; Drew Lectures on Immortality Delivered at Spurgeon’s College*, ed. John Colwell (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 31–51; and *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012). See also Oren Martin, *Bound for the Promise Land: The Land Promise in God’s Redemptive Plan*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015) and Miguel Echevarria, *The Future Inheritance of Land in the Pauline Epistles* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019).

hold that salvation should not be spiritualized as the soul's future departure to a bodyless existence in heaven. Rather, the arrival of God's kingdom "already" begins the redemption of all things, such as deliverance from injustice and oppression, which will be fully realized when believers are resurrected to a restored kingdom. Over the last thirty years, holistic eschatology has been growing in popularity among North American evangelicals, leaving little room to ignore authors such as Middleton and Wright.¹⁷

North American evangelicals have been less than enthusiastic about Padilla and Escobar. Their rejection dates back to the 1960s and 1970s, when, as Kirkpatrick notes, "evangelicals in the North would ignore the voices of their brothers and sisters in the South" despite that "the tides of change were sweeping over global evangelicalism, reshaping for many what it meant to be a faithful Christian in the contexts of injustice, oppression, and inequality."¹⁸ And they certainly have shifted, so much so that American evangelicals now engage authors like Middleton and Wright, who argue for the "present" social benefits of the kingdom. Nevertheless, despite that they were theologically conservative, in the 1960s and 1970s Padilla's and Escobar's political and social ideas were too progressive for many conservative evangelicals in the United States.¹⁹ The result was that they were dismissed or ignored, often under false accusations of being Marxists, social gospel advocates, or liberation theologians.

While they sought contextually informed readings, unlike Marxists and liberation theologians, Padilla and Escobar did not give interpretive priority to context (praxis) over Scripture.²⁰ Nor did they think the social

¹⁷ See discussion in Middleton, *A New Heaven and Earth*, 303–12.

¹⁸ Kirkpatrick, *A Gospel for the Poor*, 175. At Lausanne, for example, leaders from the United States were among those who opposed the holistic emphasis of the gospel (*Gospel for the Poor*, 28–29). Although Kirkpatrick's observation applies to Padilla and Escobar, it also describes well how Latino theologians have been treated by their northern counterparts. Justo González is an interesting case. American evangelicals freely use his two-volume *The Story of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2014) but ignore his other works on theology, such as *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990) and *Santa Biblia: The Bible through Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

¹⁹ Kirkpatrick, *A Gospel for the Poor*, 175.

²⁰ Padilla disagreed with the way Marxism took its interpretive starting point from "the revolutionary situation and interprets Scripture on the basis of presuppositions derived from leftist ideologies" (C. René Padilla, "Revolution and Revelation," in *Is Revolution Change?*, ed. Brian Griffiths [London: IVP, 1972], 77). In his critique of liberation theology, Escobar, along with Arana, Steuernagel, and

gospel movement, which held that people's actions would build the kingdom on earth, provided answers to their concerns; only Jesus would usher in a permanent state of righteousness. Though the accusations against them were false, in their day they were enough to persuade many North American evangelicals to dismiss their arguments.²¹

Not much has changed since then. One piece of evidence is Padilla's and Escobar's absence from modern scholarship on holistic eschatology, despite that their emphasis on holistic mission is noticeably similar to holistic eschatology and precedes this theological movement by at least twenty years.²² In *A New Heavens and a New Earth*, for example, Middleton supplies a brief history of the recovery of holistic eschatology. While he mentions the contributions of American evangelical authors such as Anthony Hoekema, Darrell Bock, Douglas Moo, and Tim Keller, he omits the earlier and (very) similar arguments of Padilla and Escobar.²³ Although Middleton's survey is admittedly short, the absence of these Latino theologians' positive contributions is all too common in North American scholarship. While I am not contending that authors have purposely dismissed Padilla and Escobar, it is conspicuous that, after their initial rejection in the 1960s and 1970s, their voices are still absent from literature attributed to similar theological movements such as holistic eschatology. One could also point to the absence of their books from contemporary discussions on biblical theology and "already-not yet" eschatology, with

Zapata, argue: "In good evangelical theology the church bows before the authority of the word. Human traditions and systems, the praxis of the Christian and non-Christian, every historical moment, all are to be illuminated by the word of God and judged by it. At every point in their pilgrimage on earth God's people have to subject their praxis to the light and judgement of God through his word" (Samuel Escobar, Pedro Arana, Valdir R. Steuernagel, and Rodrigo Zapata, "A Latin American Critique of Latin American Theology," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 7.1 [April 1983]: 58). Beyond their hermeneutical starting points, Padilla and Escobar took issue with the exclusive emphasis on "present" salvation in Marxist and liberationist ideologies.

²¹ David R. Swartz notes that "Escobar represents a significant evangelical stream in Latin America that has been obscured by preoccupation with liberation theology and right-wing Pentecostals" (*Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012], 114).

²² Missions is the one area that does interact with the arguments of Padilla and Escobar. See J. Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission? Theological Explorations* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000); Craig Ott and Stephen J. Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010).

²³ See Middleton, *A New Heavens and Earth*, 283–312. I say this with the utmost respect for Middleton's work, from which I have benefited greatly.

which their work overlaps. For the sake of this article, I will limit my comparison to the movement with which holistic mission has most in common, holistic eschatology, due to its comparable focus on the “present” and “future” social benefits of salvation.

If American evangelicals can appreciate works of holistic eschatology, and even assess contributions to the movement, then they can do the same with Padilla and Escobar. With this in mind, the remainder of the article will note the three main emphases of Padilla’s and Escobar’s message of holistic mission also found in holistic eschatology: (1) salvation of the “whole” person; (2) the “present” salvific effects of the kingdom; and (3) the “future” reception of the kingdom’s full benefits. Although this article is not a full evaluation of their work, my purpose is to show that their arguments are similar to those of holistic eschatology. As a result, Padilla’s and Escobar’s works on holistic mission deserve a fair reevaluation by North American evangelicals. While there are other authors from which to draw, for the sake of consistency I will note similarities with Middleton and Wright.²⁴ My hope is that this article will play a small role in encouraging American evangelicals to listen to the voices of Latino theologians, who have been encouraging their northern neighbors to follow the path that leads to a foretaste of the kingdom’s full benefits.

Salvation of the Whole Person

The first comparable emphasis is the salvation of the whole person. Padilla eschews “the concept of salvation as the future salvation of the soul, in which present life has meaning only in the ‘hereafter.’”²⁵ A soteriology focused exclusively on the soul has no place for the redemption of the body. Escobar argues: “Yes. Jesus saved souls, but he also cared about bodies and social structures.”²⁶ The Bible shows concern for the redemption of the entire person—with no false dualism that values the spiritual over the material.

In keeping with holistic salvation, Padilla and Escobar argue that people have a need to be in the presence of God while also having their physical needs met, such as food, clothing, a roof over their head, justice, and

²⁴ There are fruitful comparisons that can be made, for instance, with the work of Scot McKnight and Matthew Bates. See McKnight’s *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2014) and Bates’s *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017).

²⁵ Padilla, *Mission*, 22.

²⁶ Swartz, *Moral Minority*, 123.

basic human dignity (Matt 5:6–9; Jas 2:15–17).²⁷ Humanity will experience the full satisfaction of their spiritual and physical needs when they dwell with God in a “new creation” (Isa 65–66; Rev 21–22; cf. Col 1:20).²⁸ At that time, “our lowly body” will be resurrected in the likeness of Christ’s “glorified body” (Phil 3:21; cf. Rom 8:23; 1 Cor 15:35–50).²⁹ A view of salvation focused on the soul has more in common with Platonism and Gnosticism, which elevate the spiritual and denigrate the body, than with the biblical authors who look forward to the day when God will redeem people to experience the flourishing that was denied to them in the present age. Reflecting on Lausanne 1974, Escobar notes that holistic mission serves as a criticism “of dualistic spiritualization that had come to be prevalent in the practice of Evangelical missionaries.”³⁰

Similar to Padilla and Escobar, Middleton holds that Scripture looks forward to the whole redemption of people at the resurrection in texts such as Isa 25:6–8, when God “will swallow up death forever.” Paul alludes to this passage in his resurrection argument in 1 Cor 15:54; and John alludes to it in the similar context of Rev 21:4 when at last God “will wipe away all tears” (cf. Dan 12:2–3).³¹ Salvation of the whole person is also taught in resurrection contexts such as Rom 8:19–22. Such passages reveal the Bible’s hope of “eternal life” in a restored creation where “the original human dignity and status in Genesis 1:26–28 and Psalm 8:4–8” will be restored.³² This is akin to what Padilla calls “wholeness.”

Wright contends that the story of the Bible will not end with “souls being snatched up into heaven, away from the wicked earth and the mortal bodies which have dragged them down into sin.”³³ Instead, the New Testament writers look forward to a resurrection, which “is a new bodily life within God’s new world,” in passages such as Rev 21:3.³⁴ What Wright argues for is the redemption of the entire person at the parousia, the very point which Padilla and Escobar assert.

²⁷ Heaney, *Contextual Theology*, 239. Samuel Escobar, “La misión cristiana y el poder espiritual: Una perspectiva misiológica,” in *Poder y misión: Debate sobre la guerra espiritual en América Latina* (San José: Asociación Instituto Internacional de Evangelización, 1997), 123.

²⁸ Heaney, *Contextual Theology*, 239.

²⁹ See Padilla, *Mission*, 78.

³⁰ Samuel Escobar, “Evangelical Missiology: Peering into the Future,” in *Global Missiology for the 21st Century*, ed. William D. Taylor (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 105.

³¹ Middleton, *A New Heaven and Earth*, 26.

³² Middleton, *A New Heaven and Earth*, 26.

³³ Wright, *Simply Christian*, 185.

³⁴ Wright, *Simply Christian*, 186.

Padilla's and Escobar's emphasis on the salvation of the whole person is in keeping with Scripture's expectation that God will raise people to experience the full satisfaction of their spiritual and physical needs, including justice, peace, dignity (cf. Isa 40–66; Rev 20–22). Their perspective rebuts dualistic views of salvation that focus on the redemption of people's souls with no regard for their bodies (cf. Rom 8; Col 1:18–20; Rev 20–22). Despite the fact that Padilla's and Escobar's publications precede those attributed to Middleton and Wright by at least twenty years, one would be lucky to find even a whisper of their names in later works of holistic eschatology.

“Present” Salvific Benefits of the Kingdom

The second comparable emphasis is the focus on the “present” salvific benefits of the kingdom. For Padilla and Escobar, Jesus's advent signifies that the kingdom's blessings are available here and now, as witnessed through his miracles, exorcisms, and healings in the Gospels. Jesus is therefore the model for how Christians are to extend to others the redemptive benefits of the new age.³⁵ Escobar describes Jesus's powerful example:

Looking back from a twentieth-century perspective, we can grasp the impact of the presence of Jesus in the world. It is a transforming, healing, challenging, upsetting, prophetic presence that calls for radical change and delivers it. It is a presence registered by the witness in specific actions of approaching the poor, healing the sick, teaching the ignorant, and of kindness to children, openness to the outcast, forgiveness to the repentant, criticism of the powerful and corrupt.³⁶

Escobar's Jesus comes into the world to fundamentally transform it. He does not leave things the way they are. His reign initiates the restoration of people's full humanity and upsets the powerful who benefit from maintaining the lowly in their place. At its core, Jesus's redemptive mission is grounded in the Gospels and Isaiah's suffering servant (Isa 53) and is a product of battling injustice and powers and principalities (Col 2:15). Jesus's example is also exhibited in New Testament writers such as Paul

³⁵ Samuel Escobar, “The Return of Christ,” in *The New Face of Evangelicalism*, ed. C. René Padilla (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1976), 261; Padilla, *Mission*, 192–93. See also Heaney, *Contextual Theology*, 240.

³⁶ Samuel Escobar, *Changing Tides: Latin America and World Mission Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 45.

who, for instance, holds out Christ as the one who compels a commitment to relieve the poor (Rom 15:25; 2 Cor 5:14; 9:5).³⁷ For Escobar, the “Pauline mission . . . allows itself to be driven by Christ's example and the presence of his Spirit.”³⁸

People, then, do not have to wait for the blessings of Jesus's salvific reign. As Padilla argues:

. . . the basic premise of Jesus' mission and the central theme of his preaching is not the hope of the Kingdom's coming at some predictable date in the future but the fact that in his own person and work the Kingdom is already present among men and women in great power. . . . The Kingdom has to do with God's dynamic power through which “the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached” (Matt. 11:5). . . . The hour announced by the prophets has arrived: the anointed one has come to preach good news to the poor, to announce freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18–19). In other words, Jesus's historical mission can be understood only in connection with the Kingdom of God. His mission here and now is a manifestation of the Kingdom as a reality present among men and women in his own person and action, in his preaching of the gospel and in his works of justice and mercy.³⁹

Since the kingdom is present, Padilla rightly contends that people can now experience a taste of deliverance from the oppressive effects of sin, such as disease, poverty, and systemic oppression. There is no reason to prolong this into some indefinite point in the future.

What is more, according to Padilla and Escobar, being under the Lordship of Jesus is the reason why Christians are called to follow his example.⁴⁰ That suggests that believers are to treat fellow human beings as more than targets for evangelism quotas or means for church growth. They are to care for people as the objects of God's loving deliverance

³⁷ Samuel Escobar, “A Pauline Paradigm of Mission: A Latin American Reading,” in *The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission for the Third Millennium*, ed. Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Paul Pierson (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 56–66.

³⁸ Samuel Escobar, “Pablo y la misión a los gentiles,” in *Bases bíblicas de la misión: Perspectivas latinoamericanas*, ed. C. René Padilla (Buenos Aires: Nueva creación, 1998), 350.

³⁹ Padilla, *Mission*, 188.

⁴⁰ Heaney, *Contextual Theology*, 238–39.

from sin and all its effects, such as poverty, injustice, and powerful systems (both religious and secular) that prefer the rich over the poor (Jas 2:1–7).⁴¹ Padilla contends that the “mission of the church is an extension of the mission of Jesus. It is a manifestation (though not yet complete) of the Kingdom of God, through proclamation as well as through social service and action.”⁴² The church is thus called to express the good works associated with Jesus’s reign (Eph 1:22–23, 2:10).⁴³ In so doing, it reveals “an integral part of the manifestation of the Kingdom.”⁴⁴ Escobar looks to the Gospels and Acts to show that following in the missional footsteps of Jesus is only possible by the power of the Spirit (e.g., Luke 4:12–21; Acts 2, 8, 10, 13, 16).⁴⁵

Like Padilla and Escobar, Middleton argues that the arrival of the kingdom has “present” ethical implications.⁴⁶ He points to verses such as Mark 1:15 (“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand”) and the broader witness of the Synoptic Gospels to show that Jesus’s arrival meant a change in social circumstances for those who had been anticipating God’s kingdom. Their change would not occur in a future heavenly realm. It would take place on the earth. Citing Walter Rauschenbusch, Middleton says that Jesus’s appeal to the multitudes was not that they would go to heaven when they died, for “that would be . . . a fundamental misinterpretation, forcing the New Testament to conform to later, unbiblical eschatological ideas.”⁴⁷ These “unbiblical ideas” are in reference to views of salvation influenced by Platonism that would overwhelm the church. In hindsight, these were the very ideas against which Padilla and Escobar were arguing, which viewed salvation as the soul’s future departure to heaven and had no answers for Latin America’s struggles against poverty, injustice, and foreign exploitation. Padilla and Escobar were ahead of their time, like voices crying out in wilderness, calling people to see that the kingdom’s benefits were “already” present. It’s a

⁴¹ In the same vein, Escobar argues that Jesus’s missionary action is not “about a proselytizing impulse that sees human beings as possible followers and not people. Jesus always treated people as those created by God who have their own dignity. Jesus did not convert people into passive objects of his action but took them as conversation partners in the reconciling act of his Father, which leads them to fullness of life” (*In Search of Christ*, 323).

⁴² Padilla, *Mission*, 192.

⁴³ Padilla, *Mission*, 192–93.

⁴⁴ Padilla, *Mission*, 193.

⁴⁵ Samuel Escobar, *A Time for Mission: The Challenge for Global Christianity* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Global Library, 2013), 94–98.

⁴⁶ See discussion in Middleton, *A New Heaven and Earth*, 241–82.

⁴⁷ Middleton, *A New Heaven and Earth*, 242–43. See Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 48–49.

shame that many were like Pharisees who only grumbled at their message (cf. John 1:24–28).

Additionally, Middleton argues that the expectation of a transformative kingdom is grounded in the Psalms and Prophets, which expected that God would return “to vanquish evil and establish a reign of righteousness and justice.”⁴⁸ This is what Isaiah foresaw when he announced the coming of God’s kingdom: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’”⁴⁹ This is a text from which Jesus “may well have drawn on for his own ‘good news’ announcement of God’s coming kingdom.”⁵⁰ So when Jesus announces “good news,” he is insinuating that he is fulfilling the expectations of prophets such as Isaiah who expected a kingdom that would bring a reversal of circumstances for God’s people (Luke 4:16–30). And this means hope for “real flesh-and-blood poor people, or captives, or those oppressed by societal injustice” (Luke 4:18–19).⁵¹

While Christian interpreters have tended to spiritualize away terms such as “poor” (referring to poor in spirit), “captives” (captive to sin), and “oppressed” (oppressed by the devil or their own sin), in Jesus’s first-century context they referred to Israelites who had been oppressed for centuries under foreign rulers and were awaiting liberation.⁵² Thus, they were “real people” awaiting “real” deliverance from oppressive conditions. Jesus’s announcement of “good news” gave them hope that salvation had come. This was “good news” for the first century—and it remains so for today.⁵³

Middleton expounds on the transformative nature of the “good news”:

The good news is that the coming of God’s kingdom impacts the entirety of our lives—our bodies, our work, our families, all our societal relationships. . . . The good news of the kingdom is nothing less than the healing (literally, the establishing) of the world . . . in which we are all invited to participate.⁵⁴

What Middleton claims is, again, strikingly similar to what Padilla and Escobar were arguing in the 1960s and 1970s: that the kingdom is meant

⁴⁸ Middleton, *A New Heavens and Earth*, 243.

⁴⁹ Middleton, *A New Heavens and Earth*, 244.

⁵⁰ Middleton, *A New Heavens and Earth*, 244.

⁵¹ Middleton, *A New Heavens and Earth*, 251.

⁵² Middleton, *A New Heavens and Earth*, 251.

⁵³ Middleton, *A New Heavens and Earth*, 261.

⁵⁴ Middleton, *A New Heavens and Earth*, 262.

to transform the “present” lives of the world’s struggling masses. That the arrival of the kingdom really is “good news” for the poor and oppressed from places like the Global South. As a result, Christians should move from a gospel focused on the soul’s departure to heaven to one that is more in line with Jesus’s message: that the “good news” is for those who want to experience healing now, for those who want to start feeling the benefits of being made whole.

In a related sense, Wright argues that Jews of the first century expected that the Messiah’s kingdom would bring an end to their exile and would radically transform their circumstances.⁵⁵ They were expecting the fulfillment of Isa 11:4: that God would bring justice to the poor and side with the meek. So when Jesus told “kingdom-stories,” he made it clear that the poor and outcast were beneficiaries of the new age.⁵⁶ Appealing to passages such as Mark 1:15 and Matt 4:17, Wright says that Israel was called to “repent and believe” so as to usher in the end of exile and a radical change of status.

Padilla also mentions the importance of “repentance and faith” in order to experience the salvific benefits of kingdom membership. In so doing, he, too, appeals to texts such as Mark 1:15 and Matt 4:17 and others such as Acts 20:21 and 26:20.⁵⁷ Quoting Ladd, Padilla makes it clear that the call to repentance was not in lieu of something God would do in the future but “is conditioned on the fact that God is *now* acting.”⁵⁸ In Wright’s thought, just as in Padilla’s and Escobar’s, “God’s acting” is evidenced by the Spirit, who is in the process of renewing relationships and healing wounds.⁵⁹

Padilla and Escobar rightly emphasize the “present” salvific benefits of the kingdom promised in the Scriptures. Those who “repent and believe” receive the healing and restoration that the prophets anticipated and Jesus, in the Gospels, makes a “present” reality. What they were arguing in the 1960s and 1970s is now commonly found in works of holistic eschatology. And if North Americans can interact with such ideas in the works of Middleton and Wright, they can also do so in the works of Padilla and Escobar.

⁵⁵ See N. T. Wright’s discussion on eschatology in *Jesus and the Victory of God*, vol. 2 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 202–20.

⁵⁶ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 245, 255–56.

⁵⁷ Padilla, *Mission*, 79–82.

⁵⁸ Padilla, *Mission*, 80. See Ladd, *Presence of the Future*, 80.

⁵⁹ Wright, *Simply Christian*, 115.

“Future” Reception of the Kingdom’s Full Benefits

The third common emphasis is the future reception of the full benefits of the kingdom. Padilla and Escobar hold that Jesus will return to establish his earthly kingdom, delivering creation from bondage to sin and restoring all things. This final element coheres well with the others, demonstrating that the salvation of whole persons at the resurrection (Phil 3:21; cf. Rom 8:23 and 1 Cor 15:35–50), of which the Spirit’s arrival grants a foretaste (Joel 2; Acts 2; Eph 1:14), will take place when Jesus returns to establish his kingdom on a redeemed creation (Rom 8:18–25; Rev 21:1; cf. 2 Pet 3:13).⁶⁰ This is the fullness of salvation of which the Bible speaks, when all the benefits of the kingdom, such as justice, peace, and joy, are poured out on a world in need of liberation from the painful repercussions of sin.

Escobar reflects on the future hope of “full” salvation:

The Bible’s missional language is charged with a tone of hope, of looking to the future for liberation in the fullest sense of the word: the hope that “the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom and glory of the children of God.”⁶¹

Escobar promotes a view of salvation that is more wonderful than one that fixates on the redemption of immaterial souls. For him, salvation is a cosmic act by which God liberates people and the entire earth, i.e., all he has made, from the corruption of sin (Rev 20–22). When this occurs, Padilla argues, God will recover “the whole man” in accordance with his “original purpose for creation.”⁶²

Holistic eschatology places a similar emphasis on cosmic redemption. Middleton, for one, contends that humanity will attain its full salvation at the resurrection, when God renews the entire creation.⁶³ He argues for this point from passages such as Rom 8:19–23 and Col 1:19–20 (cf. Rev 21–22). Though creation is fallen, the biblical storyline looks forward to the time when God will dwell with humanity in a redeemed cosmos, at which time he will defeat death and wipe away all tears (Rev 5, 21–22; cf. Isa 25, 65–66; cf. Eccl 4:1).⁶⁴ The redeemed earth will be liberated from

⁶⁰ Padilla, *Mission*, 78–79.

⁶¹ Escobar, *In Search of Christ*, 333.

⁶² Padilla, *Mission*, 79.

⁶³ Middleton, *A New Heaven and Earth*, 155. Oscar Cullman, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead? The Witness of the New Testament* (London: Epworth, 1958), 9, notes the importance of placing resurrection within the context of cosmic redemption.

⁶⁴ Middleton, *A New Heaven and Earth*, 155–75.

all remnants of sorrow, such as injustice and oppression, freeing God's people to live as in the days of Eden. Wright summarizes this perspective well:

... one day the veil will be lifted; earth and heaven will be one; Jesus will be personally present, and every knee shall bow at his name; creation will be renewed; the dead will be raised; and God's new world will at last be in place, full of new prospects and possibilities.⁶⁵

I will go a step further to argue that these "new prospects and possibilities" of the renewed cosmos will be especially beautiful for those who suffered under the inequalities of the present age.

Padilla's and Escobar's emphasis on the full salvation associated with the establishment of the kingdom is a thoroughly biblical hope. The Scriptures, after all, do not look forward to the day when souls will be in heaven, but to when Jesus returns to liberate the earth from the curse and renew all things. At that time, people will experience the hope and flourishing which some, if they were fortunate, received a foretaste. Once again, what Padilla and Escobar were arguing in the 1960s and 1970s is now common among proponents of holistic eschatology. Consequently, North Americans can no longer ignore their arguments. These men deserve that their works be sifted and evaluated, as we would with Middleton and Wright.

Conclusion

In the 1960s and 1970s, Padilla and Escobar really were like voices crying in the wilderness. In their many speaking engagements and publications, they called people to repent from a gospel focused on the salvation of souls to one that is more faithful to the Bible's message of holistic mission: that Jesus came to save whole people from the painful effects of sin, which includes liberation from poverty, injustice, and inequality, so that they might experience fullness of life on earth. The kingdom's arrival makes it so that God's people can enjoy a preview of what they will one day experience without measure.

Among similarities with other modern movements, I have pointed out that Escobar's and Padilla's message of holistic mission is undeniably analogous to holistic eschatology, particularly their emphasis on (1) the redemption of the whole person at the resurrection, (2) the "present" salvific benefits of the kingdom, and (3) the "future" reception of the kingdom's full benefits. Despite their similarities, Padilla and Escobar

⁶⁵ Wright, *Simply Christian*, 186. See also Wright's *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Book 2, Parts 3 and 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 1473–1519.

have yet to enjoy the acceptance among North American evangelicals, let alone the mere recognition of their ideas, that advocates of holistic eschatology have received in the last thirty years.

We can certainly pin blame on North American evangelicals in the 1960s and 1970s who turned their back on these Latino theologians as they cried that God has come for more than people's souls—he's come to give embodied lives hope in the present. But a new generation of American evangelicals does not have to repeat the mistakes of the past. If they can appreciate the arguments of Middleton and Wright, then they can also value the contributions Padilla and Escobar. In their day, these men were blazing theological trails that are now more common, like an "already-not yet" view of the kingdom, a redemptive historical approach to biblical theology, and holistic redemption. Reading their works will open up vistas into how the "good news" offers hope to the poor and powerless in our North American contexts, enabling us to envision a church that puts more emphasis on liberating people from the sinful systems of racism and oppression than one that prides itself on the number of souls saved. But reading Padilla and Escobar only scratches the surface. We should read other Latino theologians from their era, like Costas and Bonino,⁶⁶ and contemporary ones like Ruth Padilla DeBorst, Jules A. Martinez-Olivieri, and Robert Chao Romero.⁶⁷ And so many others who would open our eyes to the cosmic-sized hope that Jesus offers a creation longing for restoration. While there is much ground to cover, Padilla's and Escobar's books are a good entre into the conversation. These men will open our eyes to how much Latino theologians can teach us about the gospel: that King Jesus has begun the processes of delivering us from the painful effects of sin, such as injustice and oppression, so that we might experience eternal peace, joy, and equity on the earth.

⁶⁶ See Orlando Costas, *Liberating News! A Theology of Contextual Evangelization* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); *Theology of the Crossroads in Contemporary Latin America* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1976); *The Church and Its Mission: A Shattering Critique from the Third World* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1974). See also José Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1975); *Faces of Jesus: Latin American Christologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985); *Faces of Latin American Protestantism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

⁶⁷ Ruth Padilla DeBorst, "An Integral Transformation Approach," *The Mission of the Church: Five Views in Conversation*, ed. Craig Ott (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 41–68; Jules A. Martinez-Olivieri, *A Visible Witness: Christology, Participation, and Liberation*, *Emerging Scholars* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016); Robert Chao Romero, *Brown Church: Five Centuries of Latina/o Social Justice, Theology, and Identity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020).