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Book Analysis, Where the Cross Meets the Street, Noel Castellanos

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Noel Castellanos is a Mexican American born in Texas whose family later moved to California. He describes his upbringing as sometimes difficult in relation to the experience of the disconnect that existed between his parents. His father, although hardworking was tough on his mother and not affectionate to the children. A storm caused his family to move to California where they lived with relatives for a while and then ultimately worked together as a family unit to purchase a home. His father was able to obtain an automotive industry job that offered more security than many in their community could rely on. Noel had the benefit of two teachers in his youth that encouraged him to pursue his education and led him to the Lord. His talents in art and athletics coupled with his desire to study theology guided his education experience.

Ultimately, the ministry work that Noel became part of served people that looked like him but the leaders did not, they were where white Americans. Noel appreciated the evangelistic approach, however he felt there existed a need to be more relational and part of the fabric of the experience of those that were being evangelized. What does the incarnate Jesus look like to a poor immigrant community? He ultimately moved with his wife and young children to a tough poor urban community in Chicago. There he found many Mexican American immigrants and had a heart for their struggle. He desired to interact with them profoundly to become part of their community. He volunteered at a local school and dealt with children in the margins. A time came when his son had an opportunity to attend a magnet school rather than the school he was investing in and this caused a bit of a conscience crisis for him. Eventually, Noel partnered

with and became part of a national ministry working in and with the poor communities to effectuate proper Christ like transformation in those very communities.

The target audience of the book is for those interested in urban ministry or for a particular heart for Mexican immigrants. Noel's writing style is fluid and easy to read, he shares and draws from personal experiences and perspectives. His use of bible illustrations to support his position is very effective. He certainly offers evidence by way of the Good Samaritan, the Galilean context of Jesus' ministry and the Nehemiah story to support the thesis that in our mission context we are to serve the poor and marginalized. A strength of Noel's writing is how he shared the difficulty he struggled within the relationship with his father. The theme of this struggle was not lost in one section but ran through the entire book. He saw beyond the evangelization of his father to the fruit and evidence of transformational change as he saw his dad holding his mom's hand. During his interaction with families in need, in his ministry, he reflected on the struggle that overworked, underpaid and marginalized Mexican American men face. This struggle was not theirs alone but usually caused hardships for their wives and children. Noel expresses great sympathy for his mother in regard to her role as a recipient of his father's abuses and neglect. That sympathy that he expressed for his mom he also had for the women of the community he served. This incarnate relational and experiential process permitted Noel to be effective in his care for those he served.

Another strength of Noel's was his providing the reality of personal health concerns for those in ministry. Many of the mentors and role models that Noel refers to in his journey during ministry have passed on as a result of a heart attack or other health concern. He himself was so consumed with his ministry work and mission that he became diabetic and riddled with stress. Thankfully, Noel was able to pivot and begin the process of care of his physical body. This

resonates with me as my father served faithfully for forty years and ultimately required a heart transplant due to declining health. Too often ministry leaders carry the burden of the flock and do not properly care for their own physical needs. Noel succinctly and, not overtly but, effectively addresses these issues.

Finally, another area that was a strength for Noel was in his reference to the illustration of the cross when evangelizing. Often in evangelical circles we express and emphasize the resurrection of Christ. In the author's context the immigrants tended to emphasize Christ on the cross and his suffering. The marginalized experience of their lives caused them to see this as the emphasis of the cross experience. However effective it might be to evangelize the cross without the illustration of the incarnate Jesus on the cross, for individuals in suffering it can be an oversimplification.

A critical reflection of the text is the politicizing of current events in his book. Noel raises some events of national attention at the end of his book including tragedies in Ferguson and Texas. Noel's theological message to couple evangelic work with *en carne* experience is profound and merits consideration. To an evangelical reading his book this message could be transformational and may very well take the strength of that individual that is effective in sharing the Gospel and touch him to also consider working in the margins. However, that same individual may hear Noel's bringing up the aforesaid events and receive it poorly thus causing him to miss the true message of working in the margins with the marginalized. In my opinion his mentioning of the events is superfluous and unnecessary. Noel should create a space to couple both the Word and power so that those effective in evangelizing would add the incarnate aspect of ministry. I know of many good men that are effective in sharing the Gospel and I would love to share Noel's experience with them to touch them to do more, be the incarnate

Jesus to the lost. These individuals would probably see the references and consider him to be someone politicizing a tragedy. Let's be transformational in their lives, as well, and give space for reflection after experience in the margins.

*Where the Cross Meets the Street* is extremely useful and effective. As a Seminarian desiring to further work in ministry this book dares me and pushes me to the margins. Would I have ever considered picking up my family and moving before, no. However, I have now thought about what would that look like for me Lord. This book causes the reader to consider the mercy aspect of Jesus' work, His involvement in the fringes. The reader too must consider their effectiveness and seek what the Lord was seeking, mercy and justice, for the victim, the immigrant, the marginalized.

A specific thought that we must consider as a takeaway is that we must become the *en carne* Jesus to the marginalized in our cities. This does not mean organizing a group and doing a prayer walk while handing out tracts to a particular neighborhood. Although, this is how many believers feel they are effectively serving their cities and there may exist some benefit herein. This means becoming part of the fabric of the city, partaking, and suffering with. I need to become a familiar face but a relevant familiar face. Before I tell you why I'm there, which is because of the love of Jesus, I need to show you why I'm there. I'm here to suffer with, to understand, to be part of. Another specific thought that we must consider is understanding culture when sharing theology. Noel discussed how the Mexican American immigrant tends to visualize an illustration of a cross with the incarnate Jesus on the cross suffering. This perspective is born out of the context of their actual struggle and suffering. Accordingly, their reflection of the cross act emphasizes the suffering Jesus endured because the struggle is very real in their context. For example, in the text the Mexican American immigrant man was

overworked, underappreciated and coping with being an unwanted stranger in a foreign place. For this individual the hardship caused brokenness with his wife, children and ultimately the environment they are in. Finally, another thought we must consider is that when we come to the rescue for those in the margins we may actually be rescuing ourselves. The author born into a Spanish speaking family could not speak the language as he became older due to lack of practice and attention. The very people in the *barrio* that he was serving were a source of help; he needed them, to speak his language. Beyond that and of greater significance in the text was how the community he helped evidenced the struggles he lived out as a child through adulthood regarding his father. As Noel saw the struggles of the families around him it helped him shape and understand the unresolved issues he was having with his father. Although, Noel was skeptical of his father, even after he confessed Christ as his Lord, he later heard the report from the pastor saying he wished he had many like his father.

I believe to properly apply becoming the incarnate Jesus to the city I am ministering in identify an area of need where I can become involved. The idea to be everything to everyone will lead to failure. If we as a ministry can identify an area of need for our city that we can focus our efforts and utilize that area as a medium to become relational to the city. For example, I feel like an area of effectiveness is education. I would be eager to offer tutoring services and build relationships with families in that regard. Another area of implementation that I must employ is becoming more aware of culture and varying religions. It is important to understand the significance of various religious customs so as not to be dismissive of others needs. The example in the text of the cross with Jesus still suffering lends itself to Catholicism in my estimation. However, in the context of an immigrant suffering the relation to Jesus on the cross makes perfect sense and I should not be dismissive but understanding and sympathetic. Finally,

in my action I must be prepared to receive. My posture and attitude must be of humility and of someone waiting to receive. Oftentimes in ministry we give out food, clothes or money feeling as if we are here to rescue. Our posture must be the process we are undertaking keeps us in process as well.