Rapture and Renewal in Latin America

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At a recent crusade in Argentina, Alberto Mottesi, the Billy Graham of Latin America, thundered to the crowd, "Before we go to be with the Lord, our eyes will see the greatest evangelistic harvest in all the history of Christianity. We are living the greatest days in the history of the Church."

Though Mottesi himself is a Baptist, the harvest he was speaking of seems mostly to be a Pentecostal one. The general growth of Latin America's Evangelical population has been phenomenal. At the beginning of the 1980s, there were about 18.6 million Evangelicals in Latin America. Now there are close to sixty million, with eight thousand Latin American converts to evangelicalism every day, according to the Latin American Catholic Bishops Conference. Evangelicals make up 7 to 35 percent of the population in some Latin American countries—becoming, in Guatemala, Brazil, and Nicaragua, more numerous than practicing Catholics. But this growth has taken place primarily among Pentecostals. Recent statistics show that Pentecostals account for two out of every three Evangelicals in Latin America, and, according to one estimate, nearly 40 percent of the world's Pentecostals live in Latin America.

Latin America in the last decade and a half has made great strides in consolidating political democracy and economic growth. Except for Cuba, all Latin nations now have democratically elected governments, and several of them, including Argentina and Bolivia, have undergone profound structural reforms. Chile is already considered an economic "tiger." The region, however, still operates in several self-destructive ways. State officials both act and are seen to act as virtual kings and lords, while monopolies are still strong in the economic, political, social, and even religious realms (with an established and, in some cases, official church). Tax evasion, exacerbated by governmental corruption and mismanagement of public funds, has crippled democratic reform and weakened the accountability of public officials. A career in government is still seen primarily as a way to amass a fortune.

Though its people are warm and generous, Latin America is also a continent marked by great social paradoxes. A land of deep religiosity, but little morality (i.e., institutionalized lying and socially accepted adultery); saturated with "macho" types, but not enough responsible men; with a ruling class ethnically "mestiza" (mix of Indian and European),

but, out of prejudice, considering itself "white"; where the law is seldom openly challenged, but frequently disobeyed or ignored.

Against this political and social backdrop, a Latin American version of "The Great Awakening" seems to be taking place. One needn't even believe in God to recognize that the historical phenomenon of a spiritual awakening remains by its nature an unpredictable event. But the question nonetheless remains why, of all the forms of Protestant and Catholic Christianity capable of leading such a revival, Pentecostalism is the one to which Latin America seems to have turned.

A typical Latin American Pentecostal service takes place in a large, poorly decorated meeting hall, with a full-blown band leading the singing, shouting, whistling, clapping, and dancing. As the service begins, the congregants become deeply immersed, their eyes closed, some crying, others singing at the top of their voice or "speaking in tongues," and still others lifting faces and hands toward heaven. The music goes on and on, building from soft strains to a fast, arresting rhythm that after nearly two hours reaches a deafening climax—and suddenly drops back again to quiet strains.

With the entrance of the pastor, the whole congregation shouts and claps, while he begins to preach a simple message of salvation through Jesus: You must convert now, while there is still time. No more drinking, cheating, and lying. The Lord is coming, soon. The music softly restarts while the pastor asks all who want to "accept the Lord" to come forward. As the leaders pray, the people start falling down—"slain in the Spirit," the outward expression of the Holy Spirit come into their lives.

There is no clear beginning of the service, and usually no clear end. Some because they have found what they prayed for, and others out of sheer exhaustion, begin to drift from the hall, and the service comes to an end. Nothing short of the final Rapture for which they pray will keep them from coming back next week, with friends and family in tow.

Latin Americans, accustomed to economic and political roller-coasters, seem to be at home with the new Pentecostal spiritual roller-coaster. Father Franz Damen, Catholic priest and missionary to Bolivia, argues that Pentecostalism in Latin America has joined itself with the popular culture, assuming the language and even some of the religious practices (vows, pilgrimages, symbols) of the people, along with folk music and dance. The emphasis on such practices as nonmedical healing has also appealed to indigenous traditions. Further facilitating the growth of Pentecostal churches is the fact that 99 percent of their leaders are native Latin Americans. Pentecostalism, declares Mortimer Arias, a prominent Uruguayan Methodist bishop, is "the most indigenous and popular Protestant modality that Latin America has produced."

More important than the elements with which Latin Americans are familiar, however, may be the elements with which they are not. The personalized dedication on the part of the leadership and flexible structure break from the Catholic and even Protestant divisions between clergy and laity. The Pentecostal acceptance of women in leadership, in some cases even at the pastoral level (typically two-thirds of the congregations are

women), adds to its popularity. Though most members of Pentecostal churches are poor and uneducated, an increase of middle and upper class members has brought the social classes together in a way unfamiliar to Latin American people. Similarly, the services bring together racial castes—descendants of the Native Americans, the European colonists, and the African slaves—in ways rare in some of the more prejudiced Latin countries. White and black, mestizo and Indian, educated and illiterate may be found holding hands and even kissing each other (a very unlikely occurrence in a highly prejudiced society).

Pentecostals are generally credited with providing a sense of community to the masses migrating from the countryside to the cities and with preaching a message that concentrates on the power of God not only to comfort spiritually but also to help materially. The British sociologist David Martin has studied the impact of Pentecostalism in *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America*, arguing that the Pentecostals have created "free spaces" where a new ethos can develop. Former prostitutes, drunkards, and adulterers freely testify to their conversions. Finding a sense of purpose in their new beliefs, many have developed abilities within the church (leadership, organization, public speaking, etc.) that have improved their daily work and helped them rise economically. Pentecostal men are found to be more sensitive and dedicated to their families. More of their family income is spent on children's education, while a recent poll of two thousand Brazilians found that they "see themselves as more optimistic and hard working than in the past" as a result of their conversion.

The significance of all this, according to *Forbes* magazine, goes beyond theology. "The old . . . order, based upon a rigid hierarchy and social immobility, has broken down. A new social atmosphere, one more flexible and more compatible with capitalism and democracy, is emerging." The Pentecostals find themselves not only questioning existing religious structures (both Catholic and Protestant), but also giving expression to a deep-rooted discontent with existing social and economic conditions—the discontent the Communists were certain existed throughout Latin America, though their revolution failed to spread. This religious dissidence is furthering modernization in Latin America, taking advantage of the new pluralism and democracy the collapse of the Communist threat allowed to develop in political and economic realms.

One might conclude that the "Pentecostalization" of Latin America promises a bright and prosperous future. Undeniably, several Pentecostal churches and leaders, offering a positive and integrated view of faith and the world, have had an impact felt in all areas of life. About whether the explosive growth of Pentecostalism will bring forth the long awaited and much needed economic and social transformation of Latin America, however, serious doubts and uncertainties remain.

Timothy Goodman, for example, has questioned the often assumed correlation of the rise of evangelicalism in Latin America with cultural development. A former fellow with the American Enterprise Institute, Goodman suggests, in fact, that if there is ever substantial economic improvement in Latin America, it will be not because of Evangelicals, but in spite of them. His conclusions may be too pessimistic, but it is nonetheless true that

further Pentecostal contribution to social change is being hindered by Latin American Pentecostals themselves, in three ways: with a line drawn too sharply between the religious and the secular, with an unnecessary rejection of reason in favor of emotion, and with a theological overemphasis on the "call to ministry" and the end of the world.

The pietistic notion that divides the religious from the secular and assigns more importance to the spirit realm over the material world has a long history. In Latin America, this pietistic view has created what I, though a Latin American Pentecostal myself, can only call a religious paranoia—by which I mean that church members place great importance solely on "religious" matters at the expense of every other activity or aspect of life. Church takes precedence over family, work, and social life. Many believe, for instance, that they perform "spiritual things" only while reading their Bibles, attending church, or praying. Everything else—studying, working, sleeping, eating—is just "secular" or "worldly." Only that music is "spiritual" or "Christian" which explicitly refers to the Bible or to Jesus.

Even money spent on charity and the family may be thought to have no spiritual basis unless explicitly given to the member's church, and there has emerged in Latin American Pentecostalism a vast overemphasis on tithing. One pastor recently declared, "10 percent of his or her income is the least a church member can give to God." Expenditures on children's education, food, business, housing, and any other legitimate expense are not perceived as being given to God.

Caio Fabio, president of the Evangelical Association of Brazil, wonders if the Latin American revival is one "in the manner of God" or if it is a revival "à la Latinoamericana." If the latter is the case, Fabio predicts, "it will die in the illusion of a superficial or inoperative evangelical joy." Fabio concludes that "we may simply become the majority in a country of immoral and miserable people, without anything changing substantially in our continent." The pattern of Pentecostals despising or at least minimizing their studies or professions and the value of their work has caused an ecclesiastical atrophy and a lack of growth beyond church activities. It has also diminished other areas of life, such as education, business, and especially politics (seen largely as Satan's domain).

The excesses of secular rationalism, with its heavy reliance on the mind and disregard for Scripture, may be ultimately to blame for Pentecostals' distrust of reason, intellectuals, doctrines, and ideologies. But sole reliance on emotion forms no adequate response. The insistence on faith-healing and becoming prosperous through prayer has led many Pentecostals to believe that the "miraculous" is the rule, and the "natural" is secondary. Personal responsibility disappears when all character flaws and sins are blamed on demons from whom one needs to be "delivered." This kind of emotionalism borders on simple superstition when used as a substitute not merely for secular rationalism, but for rationality as well.

Some months ago, a Pentecostal missionary in Bolivia was surprised when I asked him why the curriculum for his new Ministerial Training Center did not include courses on

church history. "We are training Christians to evangelize the people now," he declared. "We do not need to study church history." In the attack on rationalism, all intellectual endeavor has been abandoned together with the study of systematic theology and church history, placing even the Bible in a secondary role after "experiencing and being anointed by the Holy Spirit." In Latin American Pentecostal circles, it is common to hear such phrases as, "It doesn't matter if you know the Bible well, the important thing is to be filled by the Holy Spirit, and be led by Him." Indiscriminate acceptance of extra-biblical "revelations" and prophecies is also common.

Pentecostal preaching rightly concentrates on the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. And yet while salvation is the fundamental message of Christianity, it can create an escapist mentality if it is not matched with an awareness of our responsibilities here on earth. The emphasis on salvation—when coupled with the belief that the Second Coming is only months away or that the Rapture is immediately approaching—has caused many Pentecostals to adopt a short-term perspective on life. Why bother participating in politics, economics, or engineering? Historical events, even the celebration of Christmas, are disregarded because "Christ has been born in our hearts." If there is no future, why bother with the past? Why dedicate ourselves to such mundane pursuits as law, psychology, or even worse, philosophy?

One Pentecostal pastor, learning about my legal work on behalf of religious liberty and human life, remarked, "That is good, and I hope one day God will use you in His work." Well-known Latin American evangelists repeat over and over that they would not "lower themselves" to become presidents of a republic. The emphasis on the end of the world has added a sense of urgency to evangelism, which at least partially accounts for the rapid Pentecostal growth in Latin America—particularly when joined to the comfort it gives the poor and downtrodden in the midst of dismal economic conditions. But a constant emphasis on the end of the world can also sap the will of believers to work to improve their lot, and it may even provide a sense of vengeance at the injustices of this world.

To complicate matters, the persistent message from the pulpit stresses the importance of being "called" by God to the "full-time ministry" or "five-fold ministry." The only people who are really doing God's work and pleasing Him are evangelists, pastors, teachers, prophets, and apostles. Such non-ministers as carpenters, housewives, doctors, and politicians, when they become Pentecostals, risk being second-class citizens in the Kingdom of God. Since they are not measuring up to what God wants from them, their only hope is one day to become ministers. In the meantime, and if they want to at least partially redeem their professional skills or trades, they must use them "as a tool" for evangelism. Studies, professions, and trades are good only to the extent that they allow the preaching of the gospel in secular places.

The great and ongoing religious revival in Latin America gives Pentecostals (and Evangelicals in general) an unparalleled opportunity to transform the continent in all areas of life. But this enormous spiritual energy could be spent in individual and religious self-gratification if it is not directed properly towards society. The leaders of Pentecostalism in Latin America have good intentions, much zeal for God, and a passion

for evangelism. They must consider carefully, however, the fact that they may be helping to breed a generation of frustrated and mediocre students and professionals. "It does not matter that I had poor results in this academic period, as long as I led some people to the Lord" becomes the resulting attitude among Pentecostal students.

There are examples of Pentecostal leaders who have begun to address these problems. Over the last few years, El Verbo, a large Pentecostal church in Guatemala, has been training leaders to see every area of life as part of God's Kingdom, with the Bible not dividing the religious from the secular, but ordaining that everything done be done for the Lord. Many of its members have become involved in politics—including General Efraín Rios Montt, a former president of the republic. Some time ago I had the satisfaction of witnessing the weekly meeting of Pentecostal pastors in La Paz, Bolivia incorporating a Presbyterian pastor to train them in systematic theology. Pastor Rodolfo Sáenz Salas, until recently president of the Assemblies of God Church in Costa Rica, declared, "We need to convert our work into service to God. The quality of our work, whatever it is, will reflect what we are as people."

There have been other positive initiatives in the educational and political realms. A dozen evangelical universities have been established, concentrating largely on religious studies. Several political parties led by Pentecostals have sprung up recently, and one Pentecostal president, Jorge Serrano, was democratically elected for a term in Guatemala. A few Pentecostals have also taken a higher profile in the military, the financial world, and the social realm.

This kind of participation, however, is a delicate plant. It can bring about serious and bitter intra-faith divisions (there are four Evangelical political parties in Guatemala, three in Colombia). And it can even have a self-defeating result. President Serrano's fall in Guatemala in 1993 and a botched Evangelical insertion into Peruvian politics with President Alberto Fujimori have given renewed strength to the "politics is of the devil" mentality.

Pentecostals alone will not be able to have a transforming impact. It is essential that Pentecostals work together with all Latin American Christians. The union of Pentecostal energy with other Protestants' theological training, knowledge of church history, and emphasis on character building would make any social effort all the more effective—particularly when it seeks as well the active participation of God-fearing Catholics.

We Pentecostals must remember that God usually works through His creation, and the times He chooses to intervene miraculously are exceptional and should not be taken as a substitute for our clearly ordained duties and responsibilities. (In fact, the frequent disappointment that results when miraculous expectations are not met is one of the main causes for the abandonment of the faith.) Similarly, while proper encouragement should be given to members considering ecclesiastical ministry, the same kind of encouragement should be given to all members as they exercise their daily occupations. There is also need to balance the preaching of the imminent coming of Christ or the Rapture with an understanding that Christ in fact might delay.

Timothy Goodman's questioning of the real contribution of evangelicalism to economic and social development is understandable. There is no automatic correlation of evangelical growth with economic and social advancement. At the least, it will require that we Pentecostals see all areas of society, not just the church, as part of God's Kingdom; that our emotions be balanced and enriched by reason; that we see ourselves as ministers of God in all that we do; and that while anticipating Christ's prompt return, we are prepared for the long run.

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