

Growth and Development of Protestantism in Latin America

Ed Cottrell

Religious Studies 282: Introduction to Christianity

May 13, 2000

I. Introduction: Protestant History in Latin America

Since the arrival of Columbus in the Americas, Catholicism has been the dominant religion among peoples whom the Europeans met and conquered, imposing their religion upon the conquered. Consequently, to this day, the vast majority of Latin America's residents call themselves Catholic. Indeed, the Catholic church still has close connections to political and public affairs, and enjoyed government support in many Latin American countries well into the twentieth century. In recent years, however, this has begun to change, and Protestant denominations, especially Pentecostalism, have grown exponentially in Latin America. For example, in Brazil, only eight percent of the population was Protestant in 1980, while estimates for 1993 ranged from 13.3 percent up to 22 percent. Even more striking, of 3,477 churches in greater Rio de Janeiro in 1993, 2,122 were Pentecostal, and of the 710 new churches formed from 1990 to 1992, ninety-one percent were Pentecostal, compared to only one new Catholic parish formed in the same period.¹ Indeed, according to the business magazine *Forbes*, "Evangelical Protestantism has almost certainly replaced Roman Catholicism as Brazil's most widely practiced faith."² This is remarkable for the country with the third-largest Catholic episcopal conference (after Italy and the United States),³ yet Brazil represents only a fraction of the tectonic shift taking place in Latin American Christianity.

The roots of this Protestant explosion can be found in the first appearance of Protestant missionaries in Latin America. In 1529, a group of Germans, including a few Lutherans, settled in Venezuela, founding the city of Maracaibo. The Lutherans converted the rest of the colony to their faith, yet this was the first and last real Protestant success story until the late 1800's. All but

¹ Berryman, Phillip. Religion in the Megacity: Catholic and Protestant Portraits from Latin America. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996. 42.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

one of the other Protestant colonies before 1700 in Latin America floundered for various reasons; the remaining one, a Dutch colony in Brazil, evangelized the natives, yet simultaneously participated successfully in the African slave trade. Even in the nineteenth century, as Protestant groups began reappearing in the newly independent Latin American countries, they faced “stringent restrictions on public manifestation of their religion.”⁴ Only in the twentieth century have Protestant groups been able to find genuine freedom and security in Latin America.

II. The Pentecostals

Without question, the largest and fastest growing Protestant group in Latin America is the Pentecostals. In Brazil, for example, sixty-one percent of Protestant churches are Pentecostal, as are ninety-one percent (648 of 710) of the churches built between 1990 and 1992.⁵ Thus, we must establish what the Pentecostal movement is if we are to understand its sudden growth. Juan Sepúlveda describes the “Pentecostal experience” as “characterized by a search for an intense experience of God through the Holy Spirit, by a quest for holiness, by a strong eschatological hope, and a great evangelical zeal.” While none of these characteristics is new to Christianity, the Pentecostal movement as it exists today began around 1900, springing from the Holiness movement set in motion by John Wesley. What sets the Pentecostal movement in the United States and Europe apart from other Protestant groups is the emphasis on “Spirit baptism,” the special indwelling of the Holy Spirit which makes possible miracles and spiritual gifts which many other Protestants consider to no longer be available today. The divisions are less clear-cut in Latin America, however; Protestantism in general and Pentecostalism in particular have taken

³ Klaiber, Jeffrey, S.J. The Church, Dictatorships, and Democracy in Latin America. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998. 20.

⁴ Cook, Guillermo, ed. New Face of the Church in Latin America. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994. 43.

⁵ Berryman, 18.

on cultural flavors. Moreover, a number of schisms exist in the Pentecostal church, due largely to fragile ecclesial structures, internal power struggles, and doctrinal and ideological conflicts.⁶ Thus, generalizations are more difficult with Latin American Pentecostalism.

Various theories have been offered to explain the growth of Pentecostalism in Latin America. The major ones fall into three groups: sociological explanations, psychosocial explanations, and pastoral explanations. The first, the sociological explanations, generally focus on structural changes of recent decades in Latin American society, which is shifting from agrarian, traditional, and authoritarian to urban, industrial, modern, and democratic. These theories assert that Pentecostalism is a symptom of these changes, though the specific cause-effect relationship is disputed. The psychosocial explanations complement and do not necessarily oppose the sociological explanations, seeing Pentecostalism as a result of the anomie stemming from the massification of urban areas, which results in a society with limited personal interaction. Though less fully developed than the sociological theories, the psychosocial theories have formed the background for Catholic studies of Pentecostalism. Finally, the pastoral explanations, also found among Catholics, are essentially critiques of the Catholic church. These theories claim that Pentecostalism grows most in areas neglected by the Catholic church through high faithful to priest ratios, an absence of community in the parish structure, and the lack of missionary interest resulting from the faulty assumption that everyone is Catholic. In other words, Pentecostalism represents a “substitute Catholicism.”⁷

Other reasoning stems more directly from Pentecostalism itself. Sepúlveda claims that at least part of Pentecostalism’s success can be seen in what the religion actually teaches and practices. First of all, rather than promoting new doctrines, Pentecostalism offers a new way of

⁶ Cook, 69-70.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

experiencing God, one uninhibited by clergy. Secondly, this encounter is intense because of the act of the Holy Spirit moving in an individual, which changes the world-view of the believer, resulting in the ecstatic displays of Pentecostal worship services. Thirdly, such experiences do not happen alone, but in a believing community, which is simultaneously accepting and missionary in orientation. Finally, the experience of God is offered “in the language of the people,” that is, in simple words and phrasing which easily connect with the poor. Whatever the social causes of Pentecostalism’s growth, it must be these and other characteristics of the movement itself which have caused it to grow so dramatically in contrast to other groups.⁸

III. An Evangelical Explosion

Although the most dramatic recent growth in Protestant churches in Latin America has been found in the Pentecostal church, the changes have been widespread. Throughout the region, the evangelical population has swelled remarkably since 1960, growing as much as 570% in Guatemala by 1985. Such growth has seriously disturbed common sociopolitical assumptions, such as the idea in Brazil that loyal citizens must be Catholic; with such a rapidly growing evangelical population, such assumptions no longer hold.⁹ Whatever the sociological, psychosocial, political, or internal reasons for the growth of evangelical Christianity, the growth itself is undeniable. Indeed, the growth rate appears to only be climbing. As the evangelical community in Latin America expands, it will inevitably continue to change the face of Latin American Christianity and the culture at large. Moreover, the variety and dynamic characters of religious expressions even within the evangelical churches is creating and will continue to create a radically diverse Christian body in Latin America. As this growth continues and diversifies

⁸ Cook, 72-73.

further, we can expect to see greatly increased influence of Protestant ideals on daily life in Latin America and a dramatic upheaval in the tradition and practice of all Christianity in the region.

⁹ McGrath, Alister E. An Introduction to Christianity. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997. 340-342.

IV. Works Cited

Berryman, Phillip. Religion in the Megacity: Catholic and Protestant Portraits from Latin America. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996.

Cook, Guillermo, ed. New Face of the Church in Latin America. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994.

Klaiber, Jeffrey, S.J. The Church, Dictatorships, and Democracy in Latin America. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998.

McGrath, Alister E. An Introduction to Christianity. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997.