The International Congress on World Evangelization (ICOWE), held at Lausanne, Switzerland, July 16–25, 1974, remains as a significant milestone in the history of evangelicalism. Its impact was worldwide. Its constituency went across racial, national, educational, and political boundaries. Its speakers came from the four corners of the world. Its effects were like tidal waves that soon reached the six continents with a strategic program, a clear message, a renewed vision, and a call for unity.

ICOWE was also another forum for dialogue between Latin American theologians and their North American interlocutors. Only this time the dialogue assumed universal dimensions. This chapter examines the Latin American contribution at Lausanne and its aftermath. Again following the methodology of Rezeptionsgeschichte this examination presents the Latin American as well as the North American reception of this contribution, and how this contribution and its reception fostered the ongoing process toward maturity and independence of Latin American evangelical theology.

Mexican-American missiologist Charles Van Engen viewed the context for Lausanne ’74 as a world turned upside down. Van Engen explained that, for North America,

The hippies and the “flower children” had been questioning the most basic American values. The mainline denominations experienced an unprecedented exodus of members. The world that had seemed expansive in 1966 had become a global village in danger of overpopulation and pollution. The Vietnam war seriously questioned the United States’ ability to save the world. The Civil Rights movement ground to a halt after Martin Luther King was assassinated.¹

Particularly for evangelicalism, Van Engen understood Lausanne as a time for redefinition and reaffirmation of evangelical theology. This process happened, Van Engen explained, in the midst of an “evangelical renaissance” and new missionary zeal. Van Engen also underscored that at Lausanne, “North American evangelicals were suddenly encountering hundreds of able evangelical leaders in the Third World churches.”2 Among these leaders were several Latin Americans, whose contributions to Lausanne require more consideration than this discussion can provide. Consequently, we will focus our attention on the contribution of two theologians, C. René Padilla and Samuel Escobar, as representatives of the maturing Latin America evangelical theology in dialogue with the rest of the world. We will argue that the impact of Padilla’s and Escobar’s participation at ICOWE not only went beyond the borders of an inter-American conversation, but reached global dimensions and it represented a step forward in the process of maturity and independence of the evangelical theological production in Latin America.

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ICOWE demanded intense preparation due to the nature of its program. The plenary speakers had to submit their papers a year in advance. The papers were mailed to all the registered participants. They were expected to read them carefully and send their responses or questions to the central office in Lausanne. Then, after the speakers received the comments from all over the world, they were asked to react to them at the session instead of reading the original paper. There were also hundreds of small groups with specific topics of interest as well as regional groups where people from the same part of the world met to discuss evangelism and the problems in their area. There were meetings by country, mission-boards, fellowships, theological institutions, and other categories. There were panels on strategic issues like evangelization of Muslims, communists, Hindus, and so on. The program wanted to give every participant practical tools and encouragement to return with new ideas and an obedient heart.

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2 Ibid., 218.