CHAPTER SIX

MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR A GOSPEL OF POWER

1. Introduction

In this final chapter I return to the main hypothesis as expressed in the introductory chapter i.e. that this investigation upholds the view that the 'success' of Pentecostalism, over other forms of Protestantism is, at least in part, related to its ability to grow in the subsoil of the pre-existing popular religious worldview. I believe that my field research demonstrates that there are substantial connections between Pentecostalism and the substrata of popular religion, and that these are not merely on a superficial level but exist at the deeper level of worldview suppositions; the key supposition being that spiritual power exists and can be accessed and applied to individual life situations. In Chapter Five I have attempted to show that there are close connections between the Pentecostal and popular understandings of spiritual power, and also in ways of accessing that power. So far I have not attempted to highlight any consequences or implications for a Church largely based on this understanding of spiritual power. I will now attempt to do so here.

Here I am particularly interested in the implications that this substrata of assumptions has for the church's evangelistic practices and the resulting types of conversion produced by this interaction. Before looking more closely at these aspects of Pentecostalism in Milberg I will firstly refer back to the theological works of the three Latin American theologians whose models of conversion I outlined in Chapter Two. Keeping the key points in mind will give clarity to the discussion and aid evaluation.
2. A Model of Evangelical Conversion

From the work of José Míguez Bonino,1 Orlando Costas2 and Emilio Castro3 I have selected four elements to guide our evaluation of evangelism and conversion in the churches under study. These are:

– Turning away from the old sinful life and turning to God/Christ
– Which in turn leads to gradual acceptance/absorption of the new worldview i.e. the suppositions, beliefs and values of the new community
– leading to a new allegiance; firstly to God and secondly to the community of faith
– resulting in an eventual turning back to the needy world in some demonstrable form of practical service, with increasing commitment and understanding.

Here I have followed Costas’s order, although it is debatable; however the aim is to emphasise process, rather than arrive at a fixed formula. I would argue that there must be room for flexibility. For Latin American theologians the aim and mark of complete conversion is a turning to the world, i.e. to society in some form of service, whereas for the sociologist it is the full acceptance of the worldview on offer.4 We could consider symbols of allegiance, i.e. baptism and membership, as key indicators, but this is difficult to gauge in Latin America where believers tend to be quite mobile. Baptism and membership may indicate a current desire for allegiance, but we must acknowledge that it is a very rough tool. Whether long lasting allegiance develops or not will only be seen with time. Argentines also occasionally distinguish between allegiance to Christ and allegiance to the local church.5

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5 The survey included this question; “Did you ever leave (apartarse) after your first conversion?” Out of eighty respondents twenty seven said that they had left at some point in their lives but of these eleven gave reasons that suggest that they didn’t lose their faith,