Latin American Pentecostalism: 
A Mosaic within a Mosaic

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Introduction

Protestantism in Latin America, and in the Latino community in the United States has ceased to be the quaint choice of a tiny minority. The Third World countries in the Western Hemisphere are a long way from becoming mainly Protestant and it is seriously doubted that this goal will ever be accomplished, but the fact is that Protestantism is growing very quickly. From Catholic spokespersons we learn that every day eight thousand Latin American Catholics become Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons, and of these, fully two thirds join a Pentecostal church.1 The growth of these churches and movements is explained by one priest in terms of a “Protestant fascination.”

Since the beginning of last century, when compared to a Catholicism of the masses and a tradition in which the cultural and rutinary aspect is preponderant, Protestantism has not ceased to exert a special fascination over the more cultured and reflective elements of society, and little by little over the masses as a whole.2

In the United States, 2 million Latinos have abandoned the Catholic Church during the past fifteen years.3 Out of a projected population of 600 million Latin Americans at the end of this century, about 25% of them will be evangélicos, as they are called in Spanish, or crentes, in Portuguese.4 Close to one hundred million will be Pentecostals who will continue to be both different and similar to the other believers. Our task now is to try first to describe briefly the nature and characteristics of Latin American Protestantism, and then, to examine Pentecostalism in particular to discern how it resembles yet differs from traditional Protestantism.

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Protestantism Arrives in Latin America

Long before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth, Massachusetts, there was a Protestant presence in Latin America. It began with some soldiers who came with the Spanish Army, especially after Charles the Fifth inherited the Spanish Empire (1519–1556). Although this king was a staunch Catholic who fought the Lutherans in his native Germany and hated Luther, he was unable to impede the coming of Protestants into the New World. He had to authorize, for instance, the establishment of a Protestant colony in Venezuela, led by the same bankers who financed his wedding. The Spanish Inquisition in Mexico found and tried its first Protestant as early as 1531, only ten years after the country had become a Spanish colony. Later came British pirates and Dutch merchants who held Protestant services on Latin American soil. Around the middle of the Sixteenth Century, French Huguenots founded a colony in Brazil, but they were later wiped out by the Portuguese. The Waldensians were more successful because they came to Brazil usually disguised as Catholics and many times under false names. Once they felt secure in their new country, they began to practice, and later, to propagate their faith.

During the three hundred year Colonial period, Church and State fought hard against what was called “the plague of heresy, apostasy and depravity.” They were partially successful, especially because few of those Protestants who had come were interested in disseminating their faith, or were prevented from doing it. They actually came to the New World to pursue their trades or to engage in business. Many of them were tolerated as long as they kept their beliefs to themselves. In most every case in which they appeared before the Inquisition, it was because some of their neighbors accused them of deriding Catholic faith and practices or because they had refused to take part in communal worship, special celebrations and pilgrimages.

The Inquisition’s zeal cannot, however, be explained in religious terms only. There were many political and economic factors involved in many of the trials in which the people were condemned as “Lutherans,” “Calvinists,” “heretics,” “alumbrados” and even “Muslims.” There was even a case in which some Jesuits were called “Lutheran heretical dogs.” Although in those days France was as intolerant of Protes-

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8Bastian, Historia del Protestantismo en América Latina, 83.