Coming of Age: A Reflection on Pentecostals, Politics and Popular Religion in Guatemala

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In this article we will look briefly at how Evangelicalism has grown in Guatemala, with a special emphasis on the Neo-Pentecostals. Then we will present a typology for distinguishing Neo-Pentecostals from the rest of the Evangelical Community. Finally, we will note some of the challenges that the Pentecostal movement in Guatemala presents to the larger Christian community.

Evangelicals are coming of age in Guatemala. More than 30% of Guatemala's 9.2 million citizens now identify themselves as evangelicals. Sporting some 300 denominations and more than 10,000 local congregations, Guatemalan evangelicals maintain the most widespread autochthonous presence of any religious group in the country. A case in point is the fact that more than 80% of the Roman Catholic priests serving in Guatemala are foreigners, while the majority of the Evangelical pastors (perhaps 95%) are Guatemalans. Another example may be noted: the fact a permanent Evangelical presence may be found in most forgotten corners of the country, places where the mass is celebrated only on rare occasions.

Indeed, where there is one Evangelical congregation, within six months there will probably be three (leading me to posit what I call the "Amoeba School of Church Growth"). Evangelical growth in Guatemala tends to embody local family, ethnic or class rivalries. New congregations also provide a fertile proving ground for local leaders who believe that they are called to the pastoral ministry. Despite this massive grassroots presence, internal divisions, and a history of reticence to participate directly in the political arena have so far kept the Evangelicals from threatening the historic cultural dominance and political influence of the Roman Catholic Church. Most Guatemalans still believe that they live in a "Catholic" country.

On those few occasions in recent years when Evangelicals have tossed their hats into the political arena, the tendency has been to replace the sectarian fervor of a General Ríos Montt, characterized by some as an "Evangelical ayatollah," with the pragmatic attempts of a President Serrano, to build a viable political consensus. The differences between the two indicate just how much times have changed in Guatemala since

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the days of Ríos Montt's dictatorship of 1982-83. Ríos Montt was an evangelical caudillo. Serrano is a neo-conservative politician who also happens to be an evangelical.

The Arrival of the Evangelicals

The first permanent Protestant pastoral presence in Guatemala was instituted at the invitation of Liberal dictator Justo Rufino Barrios in 1882. It turns out that the Catholic hierarchy, close allies of the Conservative Party, were among Barrios' most powerful and wealthy political adversaries. By inviting the Presbyterians to come in, Barrios tried to undercut traditional Catholic religious hegemony as well as their control of the nation's educational system. Earlier Protestant mission efforts had been quashed by Conservative regimes. Frederick Crowe, for example, entered Guatemala from Belize in 1841 selling Bibles and New Testaments. Crowe, an Anglican, met with the disapproval of both ecclesiastical and political leaders and was finally deported by Conservative dictator Rafael Carrera.1

Since the very beginning of the Protestant presence in Guatemala, the local theological scene has closely followed developments in U.S. Evangelicalism. The modernist-fundamentalist wars and the appearance of modern Pentecostalism in U.S. churches at the beginning of the Twentieth Century were quickly incorporated into the Guatemala Protestant experience. The word we use for Protestant is evangélico. Although the Presbyterians, with a "mainline" and somewhat liberal reputation in the U.S., were the first to establish a continuous ministry in Guatemala, the local theological agenda was set by the second Protestant mission agency, the Central American Mission (CAM), which sent its first missionary to Guatemala in 1896. CAM, a faith mission, is a creature of Dallas Theological Seminary, home of Dispensationalism and the Scofield Reference Bible. Dispensationalism is by far the most influential school of theological thought in Guatemala, even among Presbyterians and Pentecostals. The other pioneer Protestant efforts in Guatemala were led by a group that later became part of the Church of the Nazarene (1901), a group of Evangelical Quakers from California (1902) and the Primitive Methodists (1914).2

The Arrival of Pentecostals

In 1934 Pentecostalism arrived in Guatemala.3 Local legend has it that a Primitive Methodist missionary then working in the Western High-

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1José Carrera and David Scotchmer, Apuntes para la Historia (Guatemala: National Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Guatemala, 1982) 21-35.