Conscientization, Conversion, and Convergence: Reflections on Base Communities and Emerging Pentecostalism in Latin America

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1. Introduction:

An Hour of Opportunity: Trends in Liberation Theology and Pentecostalism

A new historical reality has emerged within Latin America: religious pluralism. Movements within and without the Catholic church are challenging centuries of hierarchical authority, religious practice, and theological reflection. Within the Catholic church small community-centered groups have mushroomed since Vatican II. These basic ecclesial communities represent a grass-roots movement of spiritual renewal and social activism. Lay leaders, group Bible study, and practical efforts towards community improvement and societal transformation characterize this renewal of integrative Christian faith.1 From these vibrant expressions an entire theological movement has been catalyzed: Liberation Theology. This movement began in the early 1970’s as a blend of Marxist social analysis and praxis-centered biblical hermeneutics.2 It is now a mature, self-critical movement with deep historical and intercultural roots.3 Gustavo Gutierrez, reflecting upon nearly two decades of tumultuous development, emphasized several important challenges facing the movement4:

- Its internationalism challenges theologians in each concrete historical-cultural setting to discover both the uniqueness of theological reflection and praxis for a particular area and ways to strengthen ties with oppressed brothers and sisters around the world.5

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1See Sergio Torres and John Eagleson, The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities: Papers for the International Ecumenical Congress on Theology, February 20–March 2, 1980, Sao Paulo, Brazil, 107–118.

2Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1972, is the first book-length study detailing this synthesis.

3This is reflected in several studies, most notably Arthur F. McGovern, Liberation Theology and its Critics: Toward an Assessment (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), esp. ix–xi.


5Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation (1988), xix.
• Economic oppression is not the only liberation which must be vigorously pursued. Racism, sexism, and nationalism must also be discerned, exposed, repented of and displaced.

• Political action must never be separated from the wellspring of biblical and mystical spirituality. Several liberationists have begun to emphasize the primacy of God’s initiative in spiritually transforming individuals and communities.

Other voices evaluating base communities and liberation theology are equally critical but less optimistic than Gutiérrez. Alistair Kee, a British religious scholar, laments that the liberationists were (and are) not Marxist enough in their analyses and calls to action. Elsa Tamez, a feminist theologian from Costa Rica eloquently argues that the church will never know full liberation until women are received as equal partners in God’s work for the world. She sees the base communities as a sign of hope where the relational, unifying vision of feminism can exercise a transforming influence. Arthur McGovern, in a major study assessing the Liberation Theology movement, agrees with Frei Betto that “social reflection cannot substitute for the experience of God that the poor desire.”

Scholars more critical of Liberation Theology have recently challenged some of its rhetoric and theological innovation. Paul Sigmund has emerged as an important critic of the movement’s Marxist orientation. He challenges liberationists to recognize that an “ecclesiogenesis” had begun prior to any official theological trend. Issues such as personal property, human rights, and the willingness of liberation theologians to be addressed prophetically must be confronted. Rubenstein and Roth’s recent study provides a conservative, North American critique of base communities as places in which indoctrination can too easily displace on-going Christian conversion.

Hans Küng, a German theologian of international repute (and officially banned from teaching Catholic dogma with the church’s blessing

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