Latin American Pentecostalism: Social Capital, Networks, and Politics

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In less than a century the Pentecostal Movement evolved from a small rag-tag band of Christian believers to a worldwide movement with an estimated 500 million adherents. In few places has the growth been faster than in Latin America. Although the early participants in the movement were on the margins of society—"the loose dust of the earth for the wind to blow away," as described not so long ago by one Latin American theologian—the rippling waves of the Pentecostal experience have flowed into almost every sector of religious and social society.

Stereotypical Paradigms and the Need for Empirical Research

The spread of Pentecostalism throughout Latin America is an important socio-religious phenomenon whose origins and rapid growth have been the focus of considerable scholarly investigation, especially during this past decade. However, while the quantity of the literature on Latin American Pentecostalism is massive and growing monthly, for the most part studies have been generic and are now repetitive.

In spite of recent analyses, many of the Pentecostal nuances—if not major concerns of Pentecostals—are often lost to scholars working from outside the movement to discern how participants evaluate their own activities. In the past, social science studies generally attributed the growth of Pentecostalism to a dislocation of the masses brought about by economic deprivation, the breakdown of traditional society, and the consequent loss

1 Among Pentecostals, scholars would be Juan Sepúlveda, Norberto Saracco, Bernardo Campos, Manuel Gaxiola-Gaxiola, Jorge Gómez, and Everett Wilson. All scholars doing research on Pentecostals are indebted to the numerous contributions of Walter Hollenweger, including his classic The Pentecostals (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1972, and revised and updated in 1997). For an excellent bibliography on Latin American Pentecostals see Dr. Ed Cleary’s web site at www.providence.edu/las/pai.htm. In this essay, we will not always include full bibliographic references.
of traditional values.2 Later assessments of Pentecostalism have tended to perpetuate similar defective assumptions and inadequate explanations about the character and development of the movement. Many scholars assumed that Pentecostals were indifferent and even obstructionist to the fundamental issues of social injustice, discrimination, corruption, and poverty often characteristic of Latin American life.3 Not the least criticism to surface has been Pentecostalism’s apparent compromise with dictatorships and reactionary sectors of the Latin American republics.4

Clearly, until comprehensive empirical data provide precise definitions, quantification, and description of group functions and resources, only tentative conclusions are possible.3 While quality empirical research may be lacking, there is a wellspring of pertinent information contained in existing denominational reports and occasional studies adequate to support initial inclinations regarding social and political dimensions of Latin American Pentecostalism. The information routinely gathered by many Pentecostal groups, while not readily accessible to academic researchers, often includes—besides the numbers, locations, and character of church congregations—considerable particulars about the leadership, levels of education, and years of experience. Furthermore, national church leaders

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5 For example, while the overwhelming majority of Pentecostals would still be counted among the poorer social sectors, collectively their resources are immense. In Costa Rica, ten of the main properties owned by *Las Asambleas de Dios* would have an estimated value in excess of $15 million. This amount does not include the denomination’s hundreds of local churches, nor its respective properties. The value of total holdings in Latin America must be astronomical. I am not sure of the importance of all this, except that the considerable worth of physical resources is a dramatic paradigm shift from the equally startling scarcity of just twenty-five years ago.