

# Pentecostalism and Social Change in Central America (Honduran Case Study) Joe Elridge\*

## Introduction

### History

The popular view of Honduras usually begins with an unflattering reference to its dependence on bananas. Indeed, Honduras is the quintessential banana republic. From modest beginnings during the last quarter of the 18th Century, to the current sprawling operations of United Brands and Standard Fruit, bananas have been fundamentally interwoven into Honduran politics and society. The U.S. Marines only made a brief appearance in 1911,<sup>1</sup> but secured for the banana companies a degree of authority that would remain unchallenged until the 1950's. According to a popular saying at the time, it was cheaper to bribe two members of the Honduran legislature than to buy a mule.

Governments, which deemed survival a virtue to be sought after, found ways to accommodate to the demands of the banana companies, and by extension, the United States government. Honduran elites, reflecting increasing preoccupation about chronic underdevelopment, invited the banana industry to become the protagonist in efforts to develop the country. The banana barons responded by building some roads and railroads, primarily for the purpose of getting the fruit to market. Most importantly the banana companies tutored the Honduran elites in some of the finer points of statecraft, assisting them in the creation of a politico-administrative infrastructure which provided the institutional context for their own commercial operations.

The colonial period planted the seeds of Honduran sluggishness. Rugged, inhospitable mountains and a swampy north coast led Spain to deemphasize Honduras, obliging it to become dependent on more prosperous Guatemala. At the time of its independence, (which arrived by mail), Honduras was limping along on cattle and mining. The patterns of social relations and land tenure established during this period continues to define the basic framework of Honduran society.

The decade of the 1950's brought about some significant changes in the economy, the political institutions, and the military. Capitalist economic models in other sectors finally begin to appear as light industry began to make its advent in Honduras. Other agrarian interests, such as cattle, coffee, and cotton began to compete for land and capital. The impetus for this change predictably came from the outside as United States and other institutional lenders began to encourage major reforms designed to accommodate better the pressing needs for reform.<sup>2</sup>

Virtually from independence Honduras had been ruled by one of two dominant political parties. The Liberals and the Conservatives have contested power for generations, and until recently, often resorting to force to settle their quarrels. During the 1950s the Liberals restructured itself to better represent the interests of the emerging urban classes of entrepreneurs, merchants, and traders. The trade unions, largely quiescent during the first half of the century, became revitalized and began to agitate for better wages and increased political participation.

Trade unions and peasant groups were able to score some important gains, with the

\* Office of Church and Society, United Methodist Church

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Buckley, *Violent Neighbors*, Times Books, 1984, p. 123.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Sheperd, *Confronting Revolution*, Morris Blahman, William Leogrande, Kenneth Sharpe, eds., Pantheon Books, 1986, p. 126.

[This article was given at the Earle T. Hawkins Symposium at Towson State University in the Spring of 1990.]

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elites making compromises in areas of agrarian reform, social assistance, labor codes, and improvements in health and education. A historic strike of banana workers demonstrated to both workers and capital the newly discovered strength of organized labor.

### **The Honduran Military**

The military, historically little more than an armed militia which operated at the behest of one of the political parties, created its own military academy in 1954, and began, under the watchful eyes of Washington, to "professionalize" its officer corps. In contrast with its neighbors, the military never allied itself with the local Honduran oligarchy. During a brief but violent clash with El Salvador in 1969, (commonly known as the "Soccer war") the workers and peasants patriotically rallied around the military while the elites hurriedly deposited themselves and their money in Miami. The military rewarded this loyalty a couple of years later when General Lopez Arellano's government introduced a series of modest reforms designed to benefit the workers and peasants.

Military rule during the decade of the 1970s, while inaugurating some important reforms, was nevertheless characterized by corruption and mismanagement. As the decade came to a close, there was a general consensus in Honduras, prompted in part by the urging of the Carter administration, that the military should surrender the levers of government to civilians. Given the revolutionary upheaval that was gripping its neighbors, it was hoped that Honduras could continue to escape the spasms of violence that would soon engulf Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala.

In 1980, Hondurans elected a constituent assembly and a year later presidential elections were held bringing into office a country doctor running under the banner of the Liberal Party. For a time, it looked as if Honduras had passed the test, and would settle into a period of relative stability under civilian rule.

The election of Ronald Reagan, however, would profoundly shape events in Honduras for the next decade. Faced with leftist Sandinistas in power in Nicaragua and a powerful guerrilla (FMLN) movement in El Salvador, the Reagan administration embarked on an ambitious strategy to "rollback" the revolutionary Nicaraguan government and decisively defeat the FMLN. By virtue of its strategic location, Honduras was drawn into Washington's plans.

In a quid pro quo with Washington, Honduras agreed to play host to the United States military, allow its territory to become a forward base for the U.S. backed contras in their war against Nicaragua, and use Honduras to provide tactical and logistic support to the Salvadoran military in their fight with the Salvadoran rebels, in return for a dramatic increase in aid.

As a corollary, the Honduran military received unprecedented levels of U.S. military assistance and training. In a few short years, the military underwent a significant metamorphosis, becoming far more inhospitable to human rights and other social concerns. Honduras now has a powerful, modern military, indoctrinated with a limited, narrow view of national security, inclined to view public clamor for change as subversive. The military remains the final arbiter in all matters of security and defense policy.

### **Religion**

Religion in Honduras, dominated by the Roman Catholic Church, has historically been as orthodox, conservative and unconventional as Honduran politics. Honduran institutions generally have suffered from a chronic lack of coherence and structural weakness. These same shortcomings have been mirrored perfectly by the Catholic Church, which has been

long victimized by remote, unresponsive leadership.

As in the rest of Latin America, the population is only nominally Catholic, with the number of regular communicants representing only a small fraction of Honduras' four million people. Masses are poorly attended, and until relatively recently, the hierarchy seldom addressed social issues, with the notable exception of abortion and birth control. Recruitment of priests and other religious workers has been frustratingly difficult; Honduras suffers from a serious shortage of priests. Only one in every five priests is Honduran. While sweeping conclusions are risky, it is fair to say that the Catholic Church is not a significant player in terms of helping to shape the agenda for the national debate about pressing social issues.

An important caveat needs to be made with regard to the work of some of the orders. Shortly after the Second Vatican Council Jesuits in Progreso and French Canadians in Choluteca inspired the founding of a powerful movement of lay delegates. In the mid-1960's Catholic missionaries attended a seminar organized by the Family of God movement in Panama and returned determined to train and equip a cadre of lay "Delegates of the Word." Training manuals and liturgies for delegates were prepared as a way of coping with the dilemma of a shortage of priests. Since most of the rural villages were visited by priests only a couple of times a year, these priests worked successfully to train local leaders who were authorized to conduct all the affairs of the church except consecration.

The delegates' reflections were shaped by Pablo Friere's pedagogy. For several years the movement gained considerable momentum, sweeping along a balky church hierarchy. The peasant movement demonstrated considerable resiliency and resolve, in large measure due to the influence of these priests.

The lay delegates movement came to an abrupt halt in 1975 when three priests and several peasants were killed by the military in a clash over land. The hierarchy, fearful that delegates were rapidly assuming a more political agenda, moved swiftly to clamp down, thereby effectively ending an extraordinary period of considerable ferment and growth within the Catholic Church.

In many areas of the country, delegates continued to organize, despite the antagonism of the hierarchy. During the early 1980s when repression was intensifying, ten Catholic lay teachers were assassinated, eight of whom were working with the Salvadoran refugees.<sup>3</sup>

The Protestant churches, while long a feature of Honduran life, experienced unprecedented growth and change during the turbulent decade of the 1980s.

## The Pentecostals

The growth of the Pentecostal movement is one of the most dynamic and least understood phenomena in Latin America. Although no one has been able to quantify the growth, students of the movement, as well as travelers to any urban barrio in the hemisphere, can attest to the mushrooming of Pentecostal churches. According to Patrick Johnstone of the Worldwide Evangelization Crusade, Evangelicals (of which Pentecostals comprise an overwhelming majority) "have doubled their share of the population in Chile, Paraguay, Venezuela, Panama, and Haiti; tripled their share in Argentina, Nicaragua, and the DR; quadrupled in Brazil and Puerto Rico; quintupled in El Salvador, Costa Rica, Peru

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<sup>3</sup> *Honduras Confronts its Future*, edited by Mark Rosenberg and Phil Shepherd, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, CO, 1986, "The Human Rights Crisis in Honduras," by Ramon Custodio, p. 69.

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and Bolivia; and sextupled in Guatemala, Honduras, Ecuador and Colombia."<sup>4</sup> Even if we argue that the Crusade is cooking the numbers, virtually all observers acknowledge the geometric increase of the churches within this movement. All other things being equal, if these current rates were to continue, a quick calculation suggests that within two to three generations, Evangelicals might very well become the majority faith among Latin Americans.

### Anecdotal evidence

Over the past ten years, especially in Central America, U.S.-based mission agencies have poured substantial resources and energy into the propagation of their particular flavor of Christianity. Clearly the conspicuous display of U.S. wealth, culture and power have great persuasive appeal. Echoing former President Ronald Reagan's anticommunist themes, missionaries set forth to conquer the region for Christ. They were armed with a formidable electronic infrastructure and sizable amounts of material aid. In countries like Honduras the radio and television waves were filled with media-smart preachers, calling all within range to accept a conversion which was calculated to bring not only salvation, but relief from the woes of grinding poverty and escape from the fear of "communist-inspired insurgencies."

World Vision, for example, invests considerable monies in Honduras by sponsoring rather lavish seminars in plush hotels for poor Pentecostal clergy and lay people. Often men and women coming from the slums, who might never have been able to walk into a five star hotel, are treated to the amenities of first rate hotel cuisine and hospitality.

Sara Diamond has coined the phrase "disaster evangelism,"<sup>5</sup> to explain yet another strategy of evangelism. For example, when Guatemala was hit with an earthquake in 1976 and required massive international assistance, scores of U.S.-based missionaries flocked to the scene to help alleviate suffering amidst the rubble. Along with blankets and bandages, many conservative evangelical groups desired to preach a gospel often tainted by values of the "American way-of-life." Missions strategist Jim Montgomery, founder of the Disciple a Whole Nation (DAWN) movement, described the earthquake as "another upheaval the Holy Spirit used to awaken Guatemalans to their spiritual needs."<sup>6</sup> In 1976, church membership grew by 14% in Guatemala.

Jimmy Swaggert, of course, has been the best known of these itinerant evangelists, both in the United States and Latin America. Swaggert Ministries had a permanent office in Honduras, and his exhortations could be heard regularly on television and radio. The Assemblies of God Church, with which Swaggert was associated, prospered.

For example, in the 1980s, Swaggert's Central American crusades were enormously successful. In 1987, his evangelistic mission brought tens of thousands to Tegucigalpa's soccer stadium. With a speaker system Mick Jagger would have been proud of, Swaggert's knack for the theatrical brought evenings of entertainment and escape for Honduras' huddled masses.<sup>7</sup>

World Gospel Outreach, founded by Allen Dansforth, a banker turned evangelist,

<sup>4</sup> *Christian Century*, January 17, 1990, "A Protestant Reformation in Latin America?", by David Stole, p. 44.

<sup>5</sup> *Spiritual Warfare*, Sara Diamond, South End Press, 1989, Boston, p. 215.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> According to conversations I had with Assemblies of God pastors during the latter part of 1987, Swaggert's fall from grace hit the church very hard. Some pastors bemoaned the fact that some members became so disillusioned with their spiritual leader that they actually left the Assemblies of God Church.

opened its missionary work in Honduras in 1984. Rev. Dansforth, claiming that he was personally invited to establish his ministry by members of the Honduran government, operates with a \$5 million budget for medical and food aid.<sup>8</sup> The organization has stated that it believes that Moscow has selected Honduras as a main target and that World Gospel Outreach is trying to prevent communist revolution by serving the Honduran poor, particularly children whose "minds are soft" and who are "naturally dependent."<sup>9</sup>

Friends of the Americas was also founded in 1984 by Louisiana-based Louis and Diane Jenkins, with the express purpose of working with communities of Ladinos and indigenous populations who live along the Nicaraguan border. Friends of the Americas considered this region to be the most strategic place in the world, as it forthrightly proclaimed its pro-contra, anti-Sandinista bias. In its fundraising materials it spoke proudly of its support for the anti-Sandinista contra "families — wives and children of the freedom fighters."<sup>10</sup> A beneficiary of official U.S. aid, Friends of the Americas said that its medical clinic in Las Trojes is 100 yards from the Nicaraguan border and "on the fringe of the Soviet Empire."<sup>11</sup>

Many of the churches within the Pentecostal movement, especially those tied to U.S.-based organizations, came under intense scrutiny from liberal critics as well as the Roman Catholic hierarchy. They were often charged with being pawns of the C.I.A., used in support of the Salvadoran military or Nicaraguan "contras" against the perceived communist threat in both those countries.

Indeed in the early 1980s "a missionary belonging to Indepth Evangelism, put a large fraction of the Nicaraguan pastorate on salary supplements from the U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica, without disclosing the source of the money."<sup>12</sup> Such occurrences offer some credence to the charge that the use of the pro-contra apparatus in the United States was a concerted part of the "low-intensity war" against the Nicaraguan Sandinista government Nicaragua. While it is true that fundamentalist groups in the United States clearly enjoyed the encouragement of the White House, and some groups did participate in the contra support network created by Oliver North, it would be the ultimate flattery to ascribe the remarkable evangelical growth to this sort of conspiracy.

### Pentecostals Versus Catholics

The growth of the Pentecostal movement has clearly astonished and alarmed church people from the historic denominations and the Roman Catholic Church. Mainline Protestant churches, which in some cases have embraced aspects of liberation theology, are wary of a simple charismatic view of the world. Many in the Catholic Church, seeing the handwriting on the wall, unable to understand the charismatic worldview, are tempted to place the blame on external conspiracies.

In Honduras, the verbal war between Pentecostals and Catholics often spills into the open. The aging Archbishop of Tegucigalpa, Mons. Hector Santos, bluntly condemns Pentecostals as heretics and warns publically against their encroachments. (On one memorable occasion, the Archbishop inveighed against the coming of the Swaggert crusade. One unintended result of the attack may have been to increase the crowds). Bishop Luis Santos, the outspoken Bishop of Santa Rosa de Copan, went a step further

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<sup>8</sup> "Directory and Analysis of Private Organizations with U.S. Connections," Inter-Hemispheric Education Resource Center, July, 1988.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 42.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> "Christian Century", David Stole, p. 46.

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and issued a scathing broadside declaring that the C.I.A. was behind the surging Pentecostal outreach. Others see it as a conscious strategy designed to counter liberation theology and other current doctrines which might challenge U.S. "hegemonic intentions" in Central America.

The reaction of the Catholic Church is natural given the overt hostility toward Catholicism being bred within Pentecostalism. For many Pentecostals, turning away from their Catholic heritage is the cornerstone of their conversion. In their view, Catholics and even some liberal Protestants, are among the unwashed. In some cases, only those baptized by the Holy Spirit are received as brothers and sisters in the faith.

### Pentecostal Growth

While it would be a mistake to swallow whole these conspiracy theories, it would also be naive to completely dismiss them. But as David Stoll points out, even if all these accusations turned out to be based in fact, they would still not explain the magnitude of the growth of the new Evangelicals. One of the most successful denominations in Honduras and elsewhere is the Assemblies of God. David Stole notes that "according to the denomination's mission board in Springfield, Missouri, in 1987 the Assemblies spent \$20.5 million in Latin America and the Caribbean. Yet its national churches there reported 10.6 million members and adherents — approximately one of every 40 people in the region."<sup>13</sup>

Such success cannot be explained by a \$20 million investment. The vitality of the churches quickly undercuts the notion that such loyalty was purchased. Instead of dependent, lethargic congregations, the Assemblies of God are flourishing because of the strength of indigenous, highly motivated leadership. The only rational conclusion is that Pentecostalism is striking a chord. In worship, song, prayer and church organization their message is not only going out but also finding attentive audiences.

### Socio-Economic Causes

The very style of worship helps explain some of the captivation. As with the AfroAmerican slaves in the southern United States, the church is a place of escape, relief and reunion. The vibrancy of the informal liturgy is centered on participation. While the leadership role is well defined, all are invited to share in the proceedings. The very volume and intensity of the gathering sends a message into the darkened barrios that something exciting is happening. From the lighted church, a clarion call goes out to all to leave the oppressive reality of hunger, unemployment and illness and cleave to the celebration inside the church.

All activities are carried out in earnest and with almost feverish dedication. With other distractions financially unattainable, people are drawn to the catharsis of spending a few hours being spellbound by lively oration, urgent prayers, and throat rendering songs.

Pentecostal churches typically meet in the evening, and like a perpetual revival, services usually occur six times a week. So as the faithful gather to share of themselves, they are very soon bound into a powerful unit - a community. Dissenters, or rivals to the existing leadership, gradually drift away to another church, or in some cases, to form their own church.

Many of the urban poor are recent arrivals to the city. In the transition from depressed farms, where they either worked a piece of depleted land or sold their labor for a poverty

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

wage, these pilgrims find themselves deprived of friends and family. The extended family, from which they had been able to find identity and draw nurture, is often the first victim of the migration to the city. Therefore once in the city, oftentimes subconsciously, they are looking for a replacement family. These small Pentecostal congregations provide a perfect setting to recover a sense of family, something which is essential for survival in the unfriendly territory of urban slums. These new church-based surrogate families often serve many of the same functions as the families they replace. By pooling resources, and cooperating with each other, church members are provided a safety net, helping individuals who may be out of work, or facing catastrophic illness, or are hungry. Often the churches provide the equivalent of day care, or other services the governments are unable or unwilling to provide.

The leadership within many of these churches provides an explanation for what attracts so many to these congregations. The typical Pentecostal pastor, unlike the clergy from both the Catholic and mainline Protestant churches, is drawn from the same barrio as are the congregants. There are no class, ethnic, or racial divisions between the leadership of the neighborhood church and the neighborhood itself. The pastor is literally one of them. He goes to the same market, takes the same bus, eats the same rice and beans, and lives in the same housing.

Moreover he/she is likely to have the same education. Most Pentecostal pastors have similarly been denied educational opportunities as have the other barrio residents. Anyone, even though he/she may have only a 4th grade education, can aspire to become a pastor or a leader. The language, phraseology, intonation, style, conceptual formation and heritage of the pastor mirrors perfectly that of the congregation. Typically there may be no set of conditions or prerequisites which would deny access to anyone who might receive the call to preach. Similarly there may be no boards, agencies, or committees duly authorized to certify whomever might qualify for appointment. The decision to devote oneself to leading a congregation is a decision of conscience and open to virtually everyone.

### **Example of the Church of Jesus Christ, Peace, Love and Truth**

Juan Estrada lives in the Bella Vista barrio overlooking Tegucigalpa. Through the intervention of his wife, who had a conversion experience attending the Prince of Peace Church, Estrada felt the call which led him to his own conversion and subsequently into the ministry.

Within a few short months, Estrada had built a small wooden structure next to his own house on a corner of his property. From this inauspicious beginning he launched his own denomination - the Church of Jesus Christ, Peace, Love and Truth.

With many handicaps, material and otherwise, but with boundless energy, Estrada began to evangelize. His formal education interrupted after the sixth grade, Estrada set about to equip himself for this new endeavor by taking courses in Bible and theology sponsored by the ecumenical Christian Commission on Development (CCD). While maintaining a full-time job as a custodian in a public hospital, Estrada nevertheless has managed to build from the ground up several other congregations - without any significant material support. CCD did provide the mother church with cement to put in a floor and corrugated tin for a roof.

### **The Sociology of the Church of the Poor**

These Pentecostal churches, like Juan Estrada's indigenous creation, cater to the poor.

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They are on the turf of the poor. These churches are of the poor. The churches become a place where humble folk are made to feel completely at home. The simple and austere church building - maybe cement blocks, maybe clapboard,- reflect the character of their church homes. The churches are often an extension of the poverty of their lives, and that congruence communicates security and place.

A person's private morality is the topic of repeated thematic emphasis. Adherents are exhorted to shun alcohol, tobacco, gambling, and extramarital sex. Since all of the above are capable of separating primarily poor men from their meager earnings, if such exhortations are taken to heart, the consequences are evident for family life and can lead to a marked improvement in their socioeconomic status.

As Christian Lalive d'Épinay points out in his classic book, *Haven of the Masses*, employers are usually eager to hire Pentecostals, knowing that they will work long hours without much complaint. Employers also know that unions and political organizations are usually an anathema to these new converts, conveniently suiting the political-economic character of the company. Moreover there will be little or no absenteeism, as sobriety is the rule among Pentecostals.

Families are often renewed, not only because wages are more likely to be converted into food and shelter for the children, but also because sober husbands with purpose are less likely to beat wives and children. Dispossessed, disowned, divorced women flock to these churches, finding acceptance within the community and in some cases, genuine recognition. As David Stoll correctly points out, "many churches begin essentially as groups of abandoned women who decide to join a new social group led by a few family-oriented males."<sup>14</sup> In many families, women are the first to be converted, and through patient example and gentle cajoling, gradually begin to bring the menfolks along. Women with leadership potential are then groomed to assume additional church responsibilities. Although women pastors remain a small minority, their numbers are growing among some indigenous Pentecostal congregations.

While two-thirds of all Hondurans cannot read, it seems that most Pentecostals place a premium on education. As people become integrated into a church, a new desire to learn to read often follows. The motivation, appropriately enough, derives from a desire to learn to read the Bible, which has suddenly come to occupy center place in their lives. A visit to a typical Honduran home in the slums ringing Tegucigalpa will uncover no newspapers, no magazines, and no books, save one. In most homes the only book to be found is a frayed Bible.

### Theological Worldview

For Pentecostals, there is a fundamental dichotomy between the flesh and the spirit. This dualism lies at the core of their understanding of the world, and informs many of the decisions a believer makes. Reality is burdened by constant warfare between the material, from whence emerges all evil, and the realm of the spirit, from whence springs all good. Heaven and earth represent an ultimate cosmological division, leading to similarly sharp separations between church and world. This bifurcation exists in all categories of life, including society, politics, and religion. In the realm of government and politics, Pentecostals tend to equate communism with atheism and the Soviet Union. Capitalism, on the other hand, is most often associated with the United States and Christianity. As in any contest, the daily challenge of the believer is to disassociate him/herself from the temptations of the flesh. Devotion to God implies a turning away from the world. Indeed

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 47.



any association with the world carries the ultimate risk of contamination.

To escape the clutches of sin, and neutralize the dangers of contagion with the worldly virus, emphasis is placed on radical separation from secular society inhabited by unbelievers. The church occupies center stage, and all of life revolves around church activities. The church, therefore, expects and demands, an all-inclusive claim on people's time. Implicit in conversion and church membership is that all leisure will be devoted to the promotion of the faith.

When Pentecostals proclaim that the world offers nothing and is to be rejected, the assertion connects vividly with the concrete historical experience of the congregation. As has been emphasized, most devotees of Central American Pentecostalism are poor. Turning away from the world and explicitly rejecting materialism actually gives a rational conceptual framework for life's harsh existence. The world has been exposed as hostile and evil, leading to the inevitable conclusion that all one can do is wait for the final salvation which will occur with the coming of the Kingdom of God.<sup>15</sup>

All human beings are doomed to sin and to suffer. Stigmatized at birth by original sin (Genesis 3), no noble human impulse is possible. Sin pervades and permeates everything that human beings are and do. Utter depravity is the inescapable lot of us all, as sin has cancelled our image of God. We are all slaves to the flesh, which act on us as external forces. These demons, unless arrested, hold absolute sway over all human volition.

The remedy, of course, is to be born again. Accepting Jesus Christ is radical therapy, freeing us from the clutches of sin and death. Faced with the powerlessness of our human condition, we have no choice but to surrender to the power of the Holy Spirit, which effectively mediates on our behalf to break the bondage of sin. Salvation is the final release, often evidenced by the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Seized by the spirit, release comes immediately. Freedom in Christ not only atones and reconciles, but also powerfully transmits a feeling of acceptance and love. The believer is on fire, imbued with the transforming power of God, and is often propelled into a vocation of proclamation. The passivity of the reborn Christian is overcome by a compelling desire to go preach to bring others into the mystery of this new life.

In Honduras, the preaching focuses on two dominant themes which define the content of the life of faith. All sermons, from whatever biblical text, seem to end up with a lengthy description of the tribulation and the rapture. (Revelation, of course, is a favorite starting and ending point for many Pentecostal sermons).

### The Pentecostal Paradigm

The Honduran Pentecostal paradigm is obviously not unique. In this conclusion, the strands of politics and theology will hopefully be drawn together into a more coherent analysis, which will illuminate a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the interrelationship between Pentecostalism and social change in the Central American isthmus.

Pentecostalism can be defined in a number of ways. Especially in Latin America it is a very unique phenomenon in the midst of an overwhelming Catholic majority and a perceived revolutionary ferment.

In the theological inheritance of Pentecostals, theology does not make or create experience, but evolves from it. Pentecostals overwhelmingly derive from the lower classes, at the same time that Protestant growth in Latin America (if not everywhere)

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<sup>15</sup> *Faith Born in the Struggle for Life*, Dow Kirpatrick, editor, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1988, p. 299.

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correlates with social mobility. On the other hand, the consequences of social-economic-political exploitation often led to demoralization and dependence.

It is precisely within this context of poverty and marginalization that the Pentecostal church has demonstrated a remarkable capacity for rapid and spontaneous growth, sustained by a fiercely independent character.

Arising out of the lower classes of society, Pentecostals typically are either located in small, extremely poor villages or urban slums on the periphery of large cities. In both cases, though more commonly in the villages, most of the churches are comprised of women and small children. Menfolks have frequently been forced out of the village in search of work, or have abandoned the home to escape the grinding poverty.

The Pentecostal churches, however, are most frequently administered by men, either because of their interpretation of the Bible or the cultural grip of Latin American "machismo." Often these pastors will receive a small stipend from parishioners (or family, which is often one and the same). In many cases pastors will be obliged to find additional work to supplement the humble support coming from the churches.

The Pentecostal churches owe their existence and vitality to a number of factors. In some cases, foreign missionaries have helped spawn and financially undergird some congregations. By forging a community of support, churches become islands of support and nurture, consciously or unconsciously, in the midst of the anomie of a city or the isolation of a rural village. The faithful insist that Pentecostal growth should be attributed to the invisible blowing of God's spirit among chosen individuals.

If theology can be described as systematized religious experience or that which creates a religion, then Pentecostals can be said to have at best a rudimentary theology. Pentecostals place great stress on the activities of faith such as preaching and healing, while paying scant attention to rigorous Biblical exegesis and study.

A few doctrinal considerations do stand out, however, in a Pentecostal "statement of belief." Undoubtedly the most important is the belief in a "second baptism" which comes by the Holy Spirit and separates an individual for some special calling. All people are able to receive this "second baptism" and are thus called to be God's special servants.

Another theological assertion is the stress placed on the "second coming" of Jesus Christ. Clearly this notion has its roots in some millennialist positions coming from England and the United States. This faith credo has a profound and direct effect on shaping views about participating in movements which strive toward social change. While believers are anticipating the destruction of this world and the creation of a new earth with the coming of Jesus, precious little incentive exists to invest in the place where one lives, or devote time to improve one's living conditions.

On the other hand, if one can sufficiently balance the eschatological belief in the second coming with the strong injunction of Jesus to "love your neighbor as yourself," then radical religious devotion can be transformed into a powerful prophetic force for grassroots organization and pressure for social change.

The focus on the written Word provides Pentecostals with a powerful incentive to learn to read. As people grapple with the scriptures, the Bible and its language become accessible to the multitudes. The language of religion has traditionally remained the domain of the professionals of religion. The constituency of religion are generally the poor, yet the mystery of the faith is generally considered the exclusive preserve of the religious elites.

As Pentecostals began to command the scriptures, they began to appropriate a new religious vocabulary. Given the prominence of Christianity in Latin societies, these Pentecostals gradually become imbued with a different sense of their role as Christians - in

the context of their own communities. In the appropriation of the language of the Bible, they began to learn to speak God's language.<sup>16</sup> For the outcast and marginated of society, a subtle, but significant transformation occurs when Pentecostals learn to integrate and use the language of the "Creator of the Universe." Rather than being simply the objects of religious instruction, Pentecostals become subjects of a faith which can revolutionize their own image of themselves. Imbued with a new sense of self and self-worth conferred by the historic Jesus Christ, these energized Pentecostals are capable of addressing pressing social issues with conviction and resolve.

How then, does the Pentecostal movement interface with the winds of social change blowing in Latin America today? The answer is rooted in an understanding of Pentecostal beliefs about personal conversion, church growth and cooperation with the society at large.

Clearly the Pentecostal's personal theology dominates, leading to a primary focus on personal issues of morality. But personalist-centered theology, if it is not contaminated by a individualistic ideology, can indeed have great social implications. The difference between the "person" and an "individual" is the extent to which the former is conscious of those who relate to him/her while the latter is often isolated, unaware of the cause and effect relationship he or she has with others.

A traditional fundamentalist explanation of evangelism likens it to "a rescuer of lost souls into the lifeboat of eternity." As much as Pentecostals might say they are motivated by the sick souls of individuals, they, like all of us, are moved by the external evidences, be it a drunk slumped in front of a storefront, a prostitute parading up and down main street, a victim of an assault or a despairing community suffering under years of government oppression and violence. While the Pentecostal's analysis will not be scholarly or refined, they are nevertheless taking first steps toward community-building, organization and eventually social change.

In responding to their own analysis of need, Pentecostals usually tend to take the Pauline (from Paul's letters) injunction very seriously to help "the brethren" first. That is, they look within their own church first for those with serious material needs, perhaps because it takes the least amount of internal compromise to help someone who believes like you do. Most Pentecostals believe very strongly that to compromise with a person or a group which does not share their version of the faith is to be in league with the Devil. This obviously leaves little room for community organization or any kind of social change on a wider scale. Only when the definition of "neighbor" is expanded to include the larger society are Pentecostals propelled to bring healing and change to the world.

The Pentecostal movement shares some common ground with the largely Catholic "base ecclesial community," despite major differences. Both are what is commonly termed in Latin America, "popular movements," in that they find their base among the poor and marginalized of society. Likewise both movements are comprised of communities of people who are drawn together by common problems or sense of despair or frustration with their lot in society. Most significantly, however, is that Pentecostals and base communities, unlike social clubs and political organizations, are drawn by an inward religious call and centered around worship, prayer and Bible reading.

Pentecostals and Catholic base communities contrast in many ways, not the least of which is theological, which defines the world and their respective roles in it. While escatologically oriented Pentecostals are busy "rescuing souls" for heaven, the common understanding of base communities is that they are a means toward the liberation of their

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 315.

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own society and even the world. This ideological distinction informs the way each seek to work in the world, view others outside their own movements and generally relate to society at large. A crucial difference resides in their respective sources of authority. Base communities, which have grown largely out of the Catholic church (albeit a sufficiently radicalized one from Vatican II and Medellin), still tends to view authority emanating from the magisterium of the Roman Church. Pentecostals and conservative evangelicals, on the other hand, are often said to have their "paper popes," viewing the Bible as their only and sufficient authority for all of life and death.

As should be evident, generalizations about Pentecostals and social change are not easily subjected to empirical investigation, and hence difficult to ascertain. The most traditional conclusion is that Pentecostalism has become a refuge for the masses, enabling them to escape not only the harsh conditions of their poverty, but also responsibility for addressing the need for reform and change. Certainly at one level this accurately characterizes Pentecostal social behavior. However, in the conversion process, a complex set of dynamics is unleashed, which in certain circumstances can lead to a new militancy, as Pentecostals adopt a prophetic agenda for personal and social change. Until more is known about this startling new phenomenon, the jury on Pentecostals and social transformation must continue to be out.