

ADVANCE THROUGH STORM IN LATIN AMERICA

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Roman Catholicism was Latin America's dominant religion. It was authoritarian, superstitious, and backward. Latin America had more nominal Roman Catholics (RC) than in all the rest of the earth outside of Europe, the United States not excepted. The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) in Latin America was paternalistic and controlled by the state. The RC hierarchy supported military dictatorships, oppressive regimes, and was unwilling to challenge the political and social status quo. It did nothing to redress the grievances of the poverty-stricken masses. Despite its largeness, the RCC didn't have the vitality to produce more than a handful of missionaries for world missions. It couldn't provide enough missionaries to reach the Indian population. It didn't even have enough priests to care for its own parishes. Priests to staff missions to the Indians came from Europe and later on from the United States. The deplorable spiritual and moral conditions of nominal RC had been aggravated by the 19th century revolutionary struggles for independence. In 1902 the American Episcopalian bishop, Kinsolving, was bold to declare that the RCC in Brazil had repelled the people by its unchristian terms, its service in an unknown tongue, the celibacy of its priests and the abuse of the confessional. There was also a spirit of anti-clericalism, secularism, and intellectual skepticism. Despite all the evidence of Latin America's spiritual poverty, some argued that it was a Christian continent whose spiritual needs were adequately cared for by the RCC. The 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference, at the insistence of the Anglicans, clearly stated that Latin America was not to be considered a mission field. Although North American mission leaders opposed the idea, the view prevailed. Consequently, mission work in RC Latin America was carried out by predominantly North American evangelical missionaries.

The RCC was fiercely opposed to Protestants. Some were martyred. In 1887, the Rev. Abraham Gomez was murdered along with two members of his Presbyterian Church in the state of Guerrero, Mexico. The day before, a priest appealed to his congregation at mass "to make an example of the minister of Satan," assuring them of the protection of the chief of police in killing him. In early decades of this century evangelical missionaries and colporteurs in Columbia were often subjected to beatings, jailings, expulsions, and the like. When Harry Strachan tried to conduct an evangelical campaign in San Jose, Costa Rica, in 1927, RC clerical opposition went "into top gear."

Newspaper articles and leaflets denounced him as "the execrable (vile, hateful) heretic." When Dr. Billy Graham conducted evangelistic crusades throughout Latin America in 1962, the reactions towards him ranged from cordiality in Brazil to hostility in Paraguay. In Venezuela, the Jesuits called him "an ignorant farm boy unworthy of being given a hearing, an ex-door-to-door salesman"; but crowds flocked to his meetings and a dozen radio stations broadcast his message.

Prior to the 1962 Second Vatican Council, the RCC was in a deplorable state. Ignacia Vergara, a RC priest, estimated that 70% of the Chilean population didn't practice any religion, an estimate rightly extended to most Latin American countries. Despite a

90% rate of baptism, less than 10% women and 4% men attended mass. The sorry situation of the RCC was demonstrated in 1960, a year in which only six Argentine priests were ordained. The latter part of this century saw great changes in the RCC. Already in 1962, the British historian, Arnold Toynbee, said in a speech: "Things are happening in Latin America today which in my judgment will prove to be as historically significant as the Renaissance of the fifteenth century." John Mackay, a North American Presbyterian who knew Latin America well, commented that the new situation reminded him of the period just prior to the Reformation when an all-embracing, social, political and religious awareness took hold of people.

The post Vatican Council II years brought four decades of tumultuous changes in the Latin American RCC. These changes left many Protestants confused and uncertain about the new attitude of the RCC. When they left the RCC they were persecuted. They were called "heretics." They were now called "separated brethren." All in all, we can safely say that the traditional monolithic RCC structure that once dominated Latin America is now gone. Through the encouragement of Cardinal Cushing of Boston, many American priests went to Latin America. By 1982, 45 to 50 percent of all American Catholic missionaries were serving there. The laity were allowed to read the Bible, the charismatic movement made its impact felt and new diverse theologies developed. Liberation theology flourished in several Latin American countries between 1960 and 1980. Liberation theologians were no armchair scholars. They fully participated in the work of helping the poor. They proposed that in the light of increasing poverty and exploitation, Christians should use Marxist social, economic, and political tools of analysis in order to improve the lot of the exploited masses. They conceived of the church "as community with the poor and from the poor." One writer even stated that Marxist ideology in the left wing of the church had become a fact of life in Latin America. No wonder Latin American governments became suspicious of anything associated with liberation theology. Several Maryknoll missionaries were recalled from Guatemala because of alleged involvement in guerilla activities.

Protestantism in Latin America is virile and growing rapidly, largely by conversion from nominal RC. In 1900, according to J. Edwin Orr, there were only 50,000 Protestants in all of Latin America, none of them Pentecostal. By 1970, there were 20,000,000 Protestants, two-thirds of them Pentecostal. However, the growth pattern is not uniform. For example, the Protestant population in Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela is still minuscule. A favourite weapon of the RC is the argument that Latin American Protestantism is a "foreign religion" that came "from outside." This is nonsense. The RCC is also foreign as it came from Europe. Latin American Protestants were interested more in heaven than life on earth, more in the salvation of individuals than in social justice. They were also by and large anti-intellectual, satisfied with requiring a Bible school training for their pastors which does not produce creative theologians. Protestant literature veritably overflowed with attacks against the doctrines of transubstantiation, immaculate conception, infallibility of the pope, etc. Even the Lutheran and Presbyterian churches, who did not share the anti-intellectualism spirit of other Protestant groups, did not produce theological literature. Most of the works they used were translations of

North American and European authors. By the 1960s, evangelical Christians became theologically active. The "Latin American theological fraternity" has held numerous theological consultations since 1971. Samuel Escobar, an evangelical theologian, also well-known in North America, became increasingly concerned about the same issues liberation theologians were facing. He underscored the whole Gospel for every aspect of life and developed a theology from that perspective. Traditionally, Latin American evangelicals abstained from participation in politics. In the last twenty years, they experienced a political awakening. Evangelicals are changing not only the religious but also the social and political landscape of the continent. As Latin American countries are generally becoming more democratic, they are increasingly forming their own evangelical parties and supporting candidates that represent their view. Today the current evangelical church growth has its shadowy side. The Argentine, C. Rene Padilla, observes that in the last few years it comes through the constellation of elements reflecting the spirit of the times: the business approach, the use of marketing techniques to achieve numerical goals, the offer of material prosperity so that people will "feel good", and the emphasis on entertainment. Padilla comments that these factors are accompanied by a reduction of the content of the message to its minimum expression and an apathetic attitude toward the formation of disciples prepared to live out their faith in every dimension of life.

The biggest news story in Latin America is the phenomenal growth of the Pentecostal movement. According to Peter Wagner, Pentecostals form the largest group of evangelicals in ten of the twenty republics of Latin America. Latin American Pentecostalism is an expression of indigenous Christianity. It manifests itself in an intense emotional spirituality. Karl-Wilhelm Westmeier notes that on an individual level, it climaxes in the experience of Spirit-fullness and speaking in tongues, and on a communal level, in group prayer and the cultivation of varied charismata of healing. Latin America Pentecostalism has some surprising features. For example, in Chile, the Pentecostals practice infant baptism which separates it from the worldwide Pentecostal movement which uniformly baptizes converts only. The healing and evangelistic campaigns by Pentecostals posed many problems for non-charismatic evangelical leaders and adherents. They were also concerned about the continued divisions and secessions resulting from Pentecostalism. Initially, Pentecostalism took hold among the poor and oppressed. Charity work among their own faithful began early. In the 1960s, Pentecostals were far from being social activists in the political sense, but they were involved in a ministry of social help. Today Pentecostals are concerned with providing immediate help for people in need, endowing their members with a sense of dignity and giving them hope for tomorrow. In a Brazilian slum, for example, Pentecostals achieved real, if modest, improvement in their social conditions through sacrifice and hard work. The story of church growth in Latin America is one of the wonders of our time. It is a source of encouragement for North American Christians. It is also a challenge for Reformed Christians to assist Latin American Christians in developing an all-embracing Christian world and life view, which will enable them to make a difference for God's kingdom in a continent beset by social injustice as well as political and economic uncertainty.

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