

*Interchurch Relations: Exclusion,  
Ecumenism, and the Poor*

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Are Pentecostals ecumenical? Only a few years ago this question would have been considered pointless, and many students of Pentecostalism may still so consider it. Most Latin American Pentecostals are suspicious of the term "ecumenical." At the same time, the extent of their relationships with other Christians and, in some cases, non-Christians is remarkable.

As other chapters in this volume make clear, Pentecostalism is not a uniform phenomenon. Like any other human experience, religion is affected by historical and cultural factors and by social class and personal history. The Troeltschian and Weberian models of religious organization help one discern the movement of Pentecostal groups from sects to established churches. Young Pentecostal churches are impelled by a zeal to convert everyone, including fellow Protestant Christians (not to mention Roman Catholics), to the experience of Baptism in the Holy Spirit. Although there is a tendency toward exclusivism, sectarian movements can be breeding grounds for radical social experiments that in time may open them up to the world at large. Pentecostals are no exception. The experiments in interchurch relations that I shall document here, although certainly more characteristic of a later, more organized and "intellectual" phase of the movement (at least as far as the leadership of the movement is concerned), have their roots in Pentecostal theology and experience.

Pentecostal churches and denominations have participated for years in intraProtestant ecumenical activities. Pentecostals were the backbone of nationwide programs such as Evangelism-in-Depth, which brought together thousands of evangelical Christians in ten Latin American countries from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. Pentecostals have been the key players in citywide evangelistic crusades with prominent preachers. They are indispensable participants in American

Bible Society distribution programs and increasingly occupy important positions on the local boards of this ecumenical agency.

Even when they have not headed them, Pentecostals have worked closely with conservative social action agencies in several Latin American nations. More recently, they have been the key leaders in COMIBAM, a notable missionary movement from Latin America to the larger world. These activities, however, have been largely overlooked by ecumenists and students of Protestantism, who have failed to perceive their significance.<sup>1</sup> The focus of most research has been, up until recently, on the negative features of Pentecostalism.

The phenomenal growth of the Pentecostal churches in Latin America has been the object of study by sociologists and of concern on the part of the Catholic and historical Protestant churches. Everett Wilson comments that "social scientists ... are apparently more willing than religious observers to recognize the indigenous and reconstructive character of Pentecostalism. Ironically, the very features anthropologists tend to commend require the emphasis on subjective experience, freedom of action, and view of reality that non-Pentecostal evangelicals [and "ecumenicals," I might add] are likely to reject!"<sup>2</sup> Another observer comments that although "the phenomenon is a growing concern to the Roman Catholic Church – ong dominant in the region – and among 'mainline' or 'historic' Protestant churches ... its relevance to the ecumenical movement has not yet been fully explored."<sup>3</sup>

That ecumenical implications of the Pentecostal experience have not been entirely overlooked by the ecumenical movement and even from that of a few Pentecostals was demonstrated by the 1988 World Council of Churches (WCC) – Latin American Pentecostal Consultation in Salvador, Brazil. Since that consultation, ecumenical reflection and dialogue have increased not only through the auspices of agencies such as the WCC and the Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias (Latin American Council of Churches – CLAI) but also with encouragement from evangelical entities such as World Vision.

One cannot blame Pentecostals for their hesitancy to enter upon this process. Aside from their well-known free-church suspicion of "superchurches" and their believers'-church concern for maintaining the boundary between commitment to Gospel fundamentals, and lack of it,<sup>4</sup> Pentecostals are intensely aware that nonPentecostals of all stripes have often built walls around themselves that have effectively excluded Pentecostals.

### *Elitist Prejudice and Pentecostal Exclusion*

Over the years, imperfect understanding of the Pentecostal movement in Latin America and around the world has led to stereotypes that have contributed to Pentecostal isolation. Many observers have tended to think of Pentecostalism both as a religion of the alienated and as alienating in itself. Statements such as

the following, obtained through extensive interviews by Gordon Spykman and the Calvin Center with grass-roots Pentecostals in Central America, have seemed to support this perspective: 'Brothers, this life is of little value, and it gives us nothing. But since we know Christ Jesus, we must build him a church so that we can place our burdens, our lives in His hands. I am !poor, but we are rich in the Lord. God is preparing us for that place for which he will rapture us to be with Him forever.'<sup>5</sup> In other words, Pentecostals have seemed too preoccupied with the next world to be concerned about relationships in this one. However, the same research has documented the active involvement of countless grass-roots Pentecostals in movements of resistance and social change, together with Catholics, Protestants, and professed atheists.<sup>6</sup>

Christian Lalive d'Epinay's WCC-commissioned study of Chilean Pentecostalism concluded that Pentecostal communities were "havens of the masses," thus implying a kind of otherworldly escapism. David Martin, a sociologist, employs the image of a "new cell taking over from scarred and broken tissue,"<sup>7</sup> within which familial, communal, and ecclesial ties are renewed, women are protected "from the ravages of male desertion and violence," new disciplines are implanted, and priorities are reordered. "Within the enclosed haven of faith a fraternity can be instituted under firm leadership, which provides for release, for mutuality and warmth, and for the practice of new roles."<sup>8</sup> This incipient mutuality has the potential for widening relationships with other sisters and brothers.

From their earliest beginnings, Pentecostals have been dismissed by the mainline denominations as sects, implying a lack of ecclesial validity. During the 1980s it was fashionable to link Pentecostals, directly or indirectly, with a conservative United States political agenda. David Stoll has argued that this form of condescension, coming from radical groups involved with the poor, overlooked the creativity of popular religious movements in adapting foreign religious elements to their own use.<sup>9</sup> Martin defends the historical validity of sectarian movements, such as the Anabaptists, the Methodists, the Quakers, and the Swedenborgians, which have often have been the seedbeds of radical change.<sup>10</sup>

Pentecostals' sectarianism, then, maybe a necessary function of their search for identity. As they grow in numbers and maturity, Martin suggests, Pentecostals will become more secure and perhaps more aware of their social responsibilities.<sup>11</sup> And social involvement is one of the chief routes to ecumenical awareness. Indeed, ecumenism is already apparent, broadly speaking (though the term may never be used) at the two extremes of the movement – among the highest leadership, ecclesiastical leaders and theologians, and at the very grass roots of religious life, where it is multifaceted, experiential, and even interfaith. Ecumenical contacts are less in evidence at the intermediate levels of Pentecostal life – the local denominational hierarchy and the upwardly mobile and prosperity-conscious Pentecostal laity. But, as with everything else in Latin America, even this is subject to change. Seen from another perspective, the incipient Pentecostal ecu-

menism is a function of several interacting factors: poverty and systemic violence, Pentecostal growth, popular religiosity, professional contacts, and overtures from mainline churches.

### *Pentecostal Unity in the Spirit*

Before moving on to more sociological dimensions of Pentecostal ecumenism, it is important to emphasize that the church's pneumatic (Spirit-centered) theology is centered on a firm belief in the unity of all true believers in Jesus Christ through the action of the Spirit of Jesus. The scriptural passages that speak of that unity are, for Pentecostals, indispensable.<sup>12</sup> Christian unity, for Pentecostals, is a theological fact based upon the unity of the Trinity, the present and future hope that drives them, both a factor in and a requirement for the growth of the church, and – for an increasing number of perceptive leaders – an imperative in the contemporary era of the divine *kairós*.<sup>13</sup> This unity works in two directions. Pentecostals have much to contribute, including an intense experience of community and a new emphasis on the universal priesthood of the believer,<sup>14</sup> but they are challenged to show humility and repentance as well:

The Lord himself has slapped us in the face because of our earlier exclusivism and spiritual pride. He has taught us that His Kingdom is not enclosed within the walls of temples where we speak in tongues and prophecy.... As Ezekiel 37 states and Jesus said in John 3, the Spirit blows from the four winds, and we don't know from whence He comes and where He is going. For too long we have thought of ourselves as the salt among "corrupt" churches. Although it is true that in our beginnings we were a renewing force in the midst of a flickering and rationalistic Christianity, now is the time to place ourselves, with our strengths and spirituality, at the service of the Oikoumene – not, however, as superior teachers but as brothers and sisters and fellow servants.<sup>15</sup>

Evangelicals and ecumenicals alike agree that "what Pentecostals are offering to the ecumenical movement is *a spirituality* of ecumenism – a universal rediscovery of the Spirit for all Christian denominations." It is "an emphasis on the experience of the Holy Spirit and of God's presence and work wherever the Spirit wishes."<sup>16</sup>

### *Erudite Pentecostals and Ecumenical Awareness*

Since the earliest days of the International Missionary Council, Pentecostal leaders such as Donald Gee of England (at the Edinburgh Conference in 1910) and David duPlessis of South Africa (at the Willingen Conference in 1952) extended tentative hands of fellowship to the ecumenical movement. At the New Delhi WCC Assembly, two Chilean Pentecostal groups were admitted to membership:

the Iglesia Pentecostal de Chile and the Misión Iglesia Pentecostal. There was not, however, widespread sympathy for these initiatives.<sup>17</sup> DuPlessis went on to initiate Pentecostal contacts with the Vatican. This top-level dialogue had no noticeable impact, however, upon interchurch relations in Latin America.

Over the past quarter-century, a growing number of Pentecostal leaders in Europe, United States, and Latin America have ventured outside of their own Bible colleges and theological institutes to undertake more advanced studies in theology, missiology, and the social sciences. Already the effects of this can be seen in the cautiously positive attitude of some denominational leaders toward interchurch contacts and theological dialogue. In Latin America a handful of Pentecostal churches have joined the ecumenical movement at either the international or the local level.<sup>18</sup>

The move from a sectarian self-identity toward an ecumenical perspective, argues Cheryl Bridges Johns, a past president of the Society for Pentecostal Studies and a participant in the Catholic-Pentecostal dialogue, is a function of the maturation of the Pentecostal movement. Her analysis has relevance for an understanding of ecumenical relations in Latin America. Pentecostalism, she judges, is moving out of a turbulent adolescence into adulthood. In its infancy at the beginning of the century, the movement represented a radical subculture that was pacifist, ordained women for the ministry, and brought blacks and whites together for worship long before any of this was acceptable in the historical churches. Early Pentecostals understood that they had a dual prophetic role: to denounce the religious status quo and to announce the norms of the new divine order that were being worked out within their separated groups. But they were denounced, derided, and marginalized as sects by the mainstream churches. This rejection, says Johns, however hurtful, did contribute to enhancing a Pentecostal ecumenical awareness. Rejection only served to cement family relations "in the Spirit" inside the movement. At the same time, Pentecostals opened themselves up to the world in evangelism and acts of social compassion. All of this was preparation for the eventual extension of family boundaries.<sup>19</sup>

Another generation of Pentecostals, acutely aware of their marginalization, felt the need to relate to other Christians and to be accepted by them. Gradually, Pentecostals gained grudging though never full acceptance from their mainstream brothers and sisters. Even as speaking in tongues and other controversial gifts became less and less divisive – and through the charismatic-renewal movement, even acceptable – Pentecostals found that they remained social outsiders. A collective sense of shame caused Pentecostals to ape the manners of their religious "betters," even to the point of joining them in doctrinal controversies such as modernism versus fundamentalism that were not inherently part of the Pentecostal ethos. The price for acceptance was accommodation to the status quo. Pentecostals, says Bridges, were co-opted by the system.

But even while the Pentecostal movement seemed to be desperately searching for acceptance, a new generation of Pentecostal leaders had begun to call it to ac-

count, The road less traveled, the only way out for Pentecostalism, Bridges concludes, was to accept its sectarian status and turn it into an instrument for integration and transformation.<sup>20</sup>

### *Changing Self-Awareness in Latin America*

This new self-awareness has begun to affect some Latin American Pentecostal intellectuals. "In the 1960s some churches began a critical process which includes openness and participation with other churches."<sup>21</sup> Two ecumenical gatherings, the First and Second Latin American Evangelical Conferences (in 1961 and 1965)<sup>22</sup> produced the Unión Evangélica en América Latina (Evangelical Union in Latin America—UNELAM). This new movement "showed an openness to the Pentecostal churches with an invitation to participate actively in the ecumenical movement. Some churches accepted the challenge."<sup>23</sup> At the third such conference a committee was appointed to convene the founding assembly of the CLAI in Oaxtepec, Mexico, in 1978. In this meeting leaders played a decisive role:

Many Pentecostal churches were not only open to participate, but willing to vote in favor of this new conciliar experience. Many historic churches left with doubts about the future of CLAI, but the Pentecostals who initiated the process in Oaxtepec [returned] to ratify the new council in Huampaní [Peru], in 1982.... Pentecostals who stayed in CLAI were convinced of the importance of this historic step in the search for unity in our continent. Working with them has constituted a unique experience of a positive attitude toward the ecumenical cause<sup>24</sup>

It is important to point out, however, that the leaders who joined the CLAI were representatives of only one of three streams in the Latin American Pentecostal movement. Immigrant churches with European roots such as the Congregação Cristã do Brasil (of Italian Waldensian extraction) and missionary churches such as the Assemblies of God and the Full Gospel Church of God (which came from the United States and still depend to some degree on North America initiatives) have been largely suspicious of the ecumenical movement and even more hostile to the Roman Catholic church.

The Pentecostal churches that have been more open to the ecumenical movement are the national churches with deep roots in Latin American soil. Chief among them are the Pentecostal Church of Chile, which joined the WCC in 1961; the Evangelical Union of Venezuela, which was founded in 1956 by a group of dissident Assemblies of God pastors united by a desire to leave sectarian attitudes behind; the Church of God in Argentina, whose president, Dr. Gabriel Vaccaro, held high positions in both the WCC and the CLAI; and the Christian Church of Cuba. Each of these pioneer churches has established fraternal ties with ecumenical churches in Latin America and the United States.<sup>25</sup>

Yet probably more significant than the official ecumenical ties of a handful of Pentecostal groups are the informal ways in which independent Pentecostal congregations are beginning to relate to other Christians and to learn from them. As one Catholic observer notes:

While evangelical churches occasionally work together on large campaigns, especially around visiting evangelists, they tend to see one another as rivals on a day-to-day basis. One of the more interesting examples of such collaboration I have encountered is in-service courses given to pastors, in which those trained in more liberal traditions often help independent Pentecostal pastors come to a more sophisticated understanding of the scripture and a more self-critical approach to their own ministry.<sup>26</sup>

### *Charismatic Renewal*

The charismatic-renewal movement, which erupted in U.S. mainline Protestant and Catholic churches during the 1970s, produced an incipient ecumenism in the years immediately following in places such as Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, and Costa Rica. Christians from Pentecostal, evangelical, mainline Protestant, and Roman Catholic churches worshiped freely together for a few years<sup>27</sup> before extraneous forces from each theological stream nipped this spontaneous ecumenical movement in the bud. Conservative Pentecostals sought to impose a fundamentalist and authoritarian interpretation of the renewal, evangelicals were eager to convert Catholics, mainline Protestants snubbed the movement for its lack of social concern, and the Vatican placed it under stricter hierarchical control.

Fundamentalist groups from the United States stepped into the vacuum and denatured the original message of the renewal. What was once a small movement concerned with a holistic communication of the Gospel – including to some degree the good news for the poor – became the "prosperity gospel."<sup>28</sup> This is the phenomenon that the Catholic and mainline Protestant churches have labeled, with some cause, "the sects," unfortunately applying the same label to a much broader range of Pentecostals.

Middle-class charismatics in Latin America practice a pragmatic ecumenism at the political level. Political parties are being formed in a number of countries that bring together Protestants and Catholics around a common conservative political agenda. Whether these initiatives will prove significant remains to be seen. Everett Wilson is probably correct when he insists that right-wing movements are not representative of the majority of Pentecostals.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, various forces – among them scholarly dialogue at the leadership level of church unity movements and middle-class Pentecostal political awareness – have worked to increase the ecumenical awareness of conservative Pentecostals.

Probably the most decisive factor, however, has been Latin America's appalling sociocultural malaise. This crisis is compounded of unequal distribution of land, capital losses to wealthy nations, huge masses of displaced people, an unpayable foreign debt, hundreds of thousands of street children, corrupt politicians, festering shantytowns, drug cartels, spiraling violence, and deadly epidemics. This is the social context of the "Protestant explosion" in Latin America. Extreme poverty and Pentecostalism, both growing, now overlap. Mass movement that it is, Pentecostalism shares the plight of the rest of the masses in Latin America.

### *Ecumenism and the Poor*

A younger generation of Latin American Pentecostals is letting its voice be heard in international forums.<sup>30</sup> In 1985, the Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.) convened a Pentecostal Consultation of Liberation Theology in Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico. It was my privilege to attend, along with forty-five church leaders from northern Latin America. The conference, which preceded a worldwide congress on the Holy Spirit, was an open-minded one. From various perspectives, the speakers – all but myself Pentecostals – discussed the pros and cons of liberation theology for their church and mission.<sup>31</sup>

The social awareness of a significant number of the new-generation leaders was evident. Two presenters were perhaps typical of the distinct approaches to ecumenism that can be found in Pentecostalism. One was appreciative of the ecumenical movement although firmly Pentecostal and evangelical; the other is now the general secretary of COMIBAM, a Latin American missionary movement to the Third World that involves conservative Protestants from a broad range of evangelical churches.

The national churches that are most open to ecumenical relationships are those that are most aware of the plight of the poor and the structural dimensions of sin. Their proximity to the worsening plight of the impoverished masses moves growing numbers of Pentecostal churches to sometimes quite radical responses. One such response was that of the Unión Evangélica Pentecostal Venezolana (UEPV), which in 1987, published a pastoral letter to fellow Christians in an attempt to clarify a misunderstanding regarding its nature and mission: "We shall not deny that we are a 'believers' church' and a church of the poor. Our churches are made up of peasants, indigenous peoples, workers, students, and unemployed. This is the reality of our church. It is also the reality of the immense majority of Venezuelans."<sup>32</sup> The letter went on to outline the main characteristics of the UEPV: that it has opted for the poor, that it practices ecumenism, that it is not tied to any political party, and that it is, above all, Pentecostal. It points to the church's ties with other churches and ecumenical service agencies and concludes:

We do not deny our identity with these actions. But we do affirm that we are not sectarian. Sects are hermetically closed and dogmatic groups that believe that they pos-

sess the absolute truth and are closed to dialogue. We believe in the ecumenical spirit that calls us to Christian fellowship, to interconfessional dialogue, and that impels us to accept each another as members of the same body-the Universal Church.... We shall continue to affirm our openness to dialogue ... while maintaining our Pentecostal peculiarities.<sup>33</sup>

### *Ecumenism and Systemic Change*

People who live in violent societies have a remarkable capacity for adaptation. New awareness and defense mechanisms appear that often have the effect of drawing diverse peoples together against a common threat. Such has been the case in Latin America, where ultraconservative Protestants and "progressives" have set aside their theological and ideological differences for a common, usually conservative, cause. When the identity of "the enemy" changes or new challenges appear, a new self-awareness requires new strategies. In Chile, for example, after the return to formal democracy, the leaders (mostly Pentecostal) of two ideologically competing interchurch councils agreed to work together to coordinate their approach to social and political involvement and chose a respected evangelical Anglican archbishop to lead them.

In several Central American countries, guerrilla and military violence has left thousands of peasants and indigenous people dead or injured. Perhaps the only positive side effect of this situation has been the breakdown, at the grass roots, of divisions between Christians, Protestants and Catholic. In the words of one spokesperson,

What God is doing amidst his people really escapes our theological comprehension ... especially among the base of the Christian Community.... This eagerness for liberty, this enthusiasm for building a new society, this revolution, is evangelizing the church. This may seem like heresy, but today it is the truth. Never before have we seen how evangelical Christians and Catholics can meet together in a village of the highlands to celebrate their faith, because there are no longer ministers nor priests in this zone.<sup>34</sup>

In the midst of hopelessness, the Christian faith without barriers has brought hope to the peasants of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. At the height of the violence, many of them met secretly in ecumenical base communities in such numbers that it exceeded "the limits and technical capabilities" of the support groups. "A people which ... had been silent and bent over ... [has] overcome this situation to rise up proudly amidst the pain, with hope." Observers called it "a miracle ... of God .."<sup>35</sup>

The reality that this reflects is that of the Christian base communities (*comunidades eclesiales de base – CEBs*). In the 1980s a kind of Protestant base commu-

nity began to appear in Central America in the context of popular insurrection and violent governmental repression. Protestants – whether Pentecostals, evangelicals, or members of historical churches – tend to be very conservative in this region, but despite – or because of – this ecumenical CEBs have appeared in modest numbers, particularly in Guatemala.<sup>36</sup> Members of the ecumenical base communities that I have been able to observe, Catholic or Protestant, contribute valuable elements from their respective traditions. Pentecostals bring their fervor, evangelicals their emphasis on the written Word, and Catholics a stress on critical reflection in a rich liturgical context.

### *Congregation and Base Communities*

Although CEBs and Pentecostals have often been counterposed by students of comparative religious phenomena, the truth is that both movements inhabit the same symbolic world of the poor and dispossessed.<sup>37</sup> There has always been a measure of sometimes radical social involvement among grass-roots Pentecostals in Latin America. For example, Pentecostals joined the leftist Ligas Campesinas (Peasant Leagues) in their struggle for better working conditions in the cane fields of northeastern Brazil.<sup>38</sup> Another case in point is that of Benedita Souza da Silva. At age fifty-plus she is both a powerful leader in the Workers' party and a respected Pentecostal lay woman. One of thirteen children born to a laundress and a car washer who was also a macumba priest, Benedita had worked since she was ten as a street vendor, a market porter, a house cleaner, a nurse's aide, and a school janitor. She had married at sixteen and borne five children in five years, of whom only two had survived infancy. At twenty-six she had converted to evangelical Protestantism and joined an Assembly of God congregation. Her role models were Archbishop Helder Câmara and her grandmother, María Rosa, a former slave. In her own words, "For years, a Brazilian politician has always been rich, white, and male. Now we have a new profile: a black woman from a poor background."<sup>39</sup>

Although her profile is unusually high, da Silva's experience represents the upsurge of the poor and marginalized (blacks, Amerindians, women) clamoring for a place in the sun and determined to do something about it.

In an eye-opening comparative study of Pentecostals and CEBs, the Brazilian sociologist Cecilia Mariz points out that most scholarly studies assume that over the long term the CEBs "will exert a leftward influence in Brazilian political life and that Pentecostalism, by its encouragement of private piety and docility, will indirectly support the forces of conservatism." This is not, however, what her field research in the shantytowns of Recife has revealed.<sup>40</sup> Both movements have found that there are limits to their capacities to put their official ideologies into practice:

Despite their different assumptions and intentions, it seems that the attempt of the adherents of these two movements to unify their faith with their lives has strikingly similar results. When Pentecostals try to restrict their lives to spiritual matters and

[CEB] members try to transform all spiritual questions into everyday problems, they experience the limits of the applicability of their ideal values and conceptions.<sup>41</sup>

Pentecostals, Mariz observes, "are not able to live only a spiritual life, but find themselves involved in politics as well." The CEBs face similar limitations; their spiritual needs require satisfaction alongside "the fight for social justice and equality."<sup>42</sup>

Because they are organized in similar ways and their members have many experiences in common, the two groups in effect encourage behaviors that are surprisingly similar. Consequently, attempting to live by the precepts of these movements generates behavior that does not entirely reflect the values expressed in their official systems of discourse.<sup>43</sup> Both movements foster self-esteem, provide national support networks, "develop leadership skills, promote literacy, and encourage a sober and ascetic life-style:" When these "experiences, dispositions, and abilities" are brought together, they "can facilitate social mobility and ... enable the members to promote or defend their interests in the arena."<sup>44</sup>

Does this similarity of social contexts, spiritual needs, and overall impact – despite dissimilar ideologies – imply that Pentecostals and CEB members relate to each other as fellow Christians or as fellow marginalized members of oppressive societies? The answer to this question may become clearer in the following section. Meanwhile, in this interaction the grass-roots Pentecostal congregations seem to be winning over large numbers of CEB members to their congregations when barely a decade ago the current seemed to be flowing slowly in the opposite direction. The Centro Ecuménico de Documentação e Informação (Ecumenical Documentation and Information Center – CEDI), a well-known Brazilian ecumenical research center and think tank, has this to say:

Intellectuals, ecclesiastical authorities, and pastoral agents are every day more amazed at the conversion of leaders of social movements and activists in grass-roots pastoral formation to groups belonging to autonomous [i.e., "national"] Pentecostalism. Even more surprising is the change that takes place in the lives of converts: eroded family and neighborhood relationships are restored, violence is rejected, and conduct is guided by acceptable norms.<sup>45</sup>

What is the reason for this amazing change of allegiance? I shall suggest three: cultural alienation, institutionalization, and disillusionment with the established churches.

*Cultural alienation.* Base-community leaders maybe relying too much on sociological analysis and overlooking the existential and spiritual needs of the poor. In some cases, the movement seems to be viewed as elitist. The historian Peter Winn comments that the different approaches to literacy of the Pentecostals and the CEBs may be a factor in the drift of the latter to the former: "The [CEBs], with their stress on Bible reading and the analysis of the written word, emphasized a literacy that many poor Brazilians did not possess."<sup>46</sup> One illiterate woman

who moved from a base community in a Rio shantytown to a Pentecostal church explained it this way: "I used to be a Catholic. But when these Bible circles came, all they did was read, read, read. There was no more prayer. I felt they only liked those who could read."<sup>47</sup> This criticism is revealing, because the Brazilian CEB coordinators had once used literacy as a keystone of their consciousness-raising methodology,<sup>48</sup> somehow overlooking the fact that the people belonged to an oral culture.

*Institutionalization.* José Comblin, a Belgian liberation theologian and ardent CEB apologist, suggests that the CEBs have turned in upon themselves too much and need to learn from Pentecostals about how to share their faith with the unchurched. The CEBs of northeastern Brazil

show little interest in adding new members; they are self-contained, a world unto themselves. There is no dialogue with the masses; their programs reflect their own self-interests rather than the real needs of the people.... In contrast, what allows for the very strong missionary spirit of the Pentecostals is precisely their freedom of action. No group has exclusive claim its own turf. Every community must work to win a following.<sup>49</sup>

*Disillusionment with the established churches.* Another clue to the growth of Pentecostalism at the expense of the base communities in Brazil is found in the following statement from a leading Brazilian daily:

The decline of the so-called historical churches ... and the growth of the Pentecostal sects can be seen as the consequence of the disillusionment of urban Brazilians, who do not find in the former a source of spiritual compensation for the bitterness of their daily lives. Disillusionment largely explains why five churches of the "new denominations" appear in Rio de Janeiro every week. This is a religious phenomenon of great consequence, if one pays attention to the recently converted mother who remarked: "We seize on whatever religion is closest to us."... The more dehumanizing life becomes in urban spaces, it would seem, the less space there is for acceptance of historical religions.... The poorer the population of Rio becomes, the less Catholic it is.<sup>50</sup>

Seizing on whatever religion is closest expresses a kind of eclectic ecumenism that is unstructured and unplanned.

#### *Needs of the Poor: Eclectic Ecumenism*

The pastor of a grass-roots Pentecostal congregation sums up the general attitude of the very poor toward religious differentiation as follows: "I pick up everything that comes my way [on the radio]: mass, spiritist service, everything."<sup>51</sup> As early as 1980, the Brazilian marxist sociologist Carlos Rodríguez Brandão carried out

extensive research among CEB members, Pentecostals, and spiritists in a typical small town in the interior of Sao Paulo state. One of his most startling conclusions was that "confessional distinctions tend to blur the closer one gets to the grass roots":

On certain sacred days Brazilian peasants will take candles to the priest for a blessing – one of the few times they step into the parish church, because this is a function that only a priest is deemed powerful enough to perform.... The same peasants may listen to Pentecostal broadcasts and attend the tent meetings of a grass-roots Pentecostal healer in order to resolve a physical problem that the "saints" were either unwilling or unable to address. Or *they* may just as readily seek the services of a local spiritist *macumbeiro* whose magic has been found to be powerful in specific instances.<sup>52</sup>

But is this ecumenism or something closer to syncretism? The point is that grass-roots Pentecostals, pastors among them, are part of this mobile mass of people. This eclecticism is seemingly less a matter of a syncretism of beliefs than a natural folk response to the supernatural. Peasants and the very poor in the large urban centers of Latin America seem willing to resort to any being or force that might have the power to resolve their problems. In the words of one folk practitioner, "As long as it is religious and it is for our good, it is all the same thing."<sup>53</sup> This eclecticism may be another explanation for the tremendous growth of Pentecostalism in Brazil for the mobility within the "popular" Pentecostal movement – a mobility that in time may bring Pentecostals to greater awareness of the world around them.

#### *Pentecostalism and Amerindian Religiosity*

Pentecostals have had considerable growth among the Amerindian populations of Central America and the Andean region. This is perhaps because their churches are similar to the native village structure, which combines a sharing community with authoritarian or patriarchal leadership. The close relationship of native pastors to their congregations guarantees that church activities are embedded in a culturally appropriate authoritarian system that does not necessarily break entirely with village life. A student of one Mayan Protestant denomination asserts that

deliberation and dialogue within the community are factors of great importance in the culture of the Mayas. The individual has traditionally defined his or her identity in terms of the community, principally the family and the village. Decisions are not made individually, but rather in the framework of these social relationships, to which they are responsible. So too, the Mayan [Protestants are] a community in which in-

dividual Christians are bound together.... They also find in and through the community material solidarity in a variety of ways....

Through their membership in this new community the Mayan [Protestants] are interconnected with the community of the whole church beyond the circumstances of their village. Within the village they distance themselves from others who, for example, practice the traditional indigenous religion. But this distancing is not so strong that the responsibility to the village community would be completely shattered.... The social practice and the theology of the Mayan [Protestants] are shaped by the membership to both the inner circle of the church and the outer circle of the indigenous community.<sup>54</sup>

Although Pentecostalism has been criticized as a divisive and individualistic "ideology of sin and salvation," the same critics grudgingly recognize that it is filling a "social vacuum created by the destruction of families and communities." A study of Mayan widows and evangelicals reveals that "rather than a turning away from Mayan values, these evangelical affiliations, in spite of their fire-and-brimstone discourse, provide Mayan women and their families with a mechanism to recapture control over their lives."<sup>55</sup>

In the ancient Maya heartland, "sin and salvation," "fire and brimstone," and Pentecostal ecstasies may be responding to the millennial mystique of Maya religion, which is still very much alive among highland peoples. In the words of a prominent Pentecostal leader, "We Pentecostals are very suspicious of anything that smells of the ancient cult. We consider it paganism; but we would like to think that Pentecostals are closest to the ancient Maya religiosity of any Protestant movement."<sup>56</sup> Although Pentecostal leaders are usually wary of allowing their members to work with other Protestants, Catholics, and Maya religionists on common projects, there is evidence that some Amerindian Protestants and Pentecostals maintain a sub-rosa relationship with the religious symbols of their forefathers. Indeed, from confidential conversations and reports from Maya Protestants and from my own observations, I know that some Protestant pastors participate secretly in Maya religious ceremonies. Maya religiosity is deeply embedded in the soul of every highland peasant in Guatemala and is at the heart of the family value systems.<sup>57</sup>

Women are particularly active as agents of change and cohesion. They "are trying to regain a sense of community, sharing, group undertakings in a respectful and dignified way, so emblematic of Mayan culture."<sup>58</sup> However, the women in the Linda Green's study tend to move back and forth between the various religious groups; this suggests that they gain only partial satisfaction from any one of them: "The fluidity with which the women cross religious boundaries points to the pragmatic approach they have adopted as they struggle to meet exigencies." Choices are made not on doctrinal grounds but "from available options, trying to recapture piecemeal elements of community" that have been destroyed in the violence and genocide.<sup>59</sup> "We have to ask how ordinary people choose between the

religious discourses available to them, bend these to their own purposes, and wend their way in and out of particular groups."<sup>60</sup>

### *Orality, Literacy, and Ecumenism*

The fluid attitude of peasant and traditional ethnic cultures toward the available religious resources seems to be a characteristic of most oral cultures. Pentecostals move between their fundamental oral culture and the literate and dogmatic culture of mainline Pentecostalism. "The process of institutionalization is gradually moving 'mainline' Pentecostals away from the popular sector of society, and may be slowing their numerical growth." Meanwhile, "the dissident sector of Pentecostalism ["store-front" Pentecostalism] is growing because they find in their own popular religion the supernatural protection, community identity, and the experience of power over the sacred world that mainline Pentecostals are leaving behind."<sup>61</sup>

Borrowing categories from students of oral cultures, in particular Walter J. Ong, a Roman Catholic,<sup>62</sup> Quentin Schultze, a Protestant communications specialist, develops a kind of model for understanding Pentecostals. Some of his insights may help us locate and elucidate Pentecostal ecumenism at its various social levels. "Oral culture is an organism, whereas more literate culture is an organization." Literacy impels "conversionist" religions "to rationalize and bureaucratize faith" on the basis of documents that determine the range of acceptable belief and practice. "Literacy also enables religions to establish organizations that maintain the documents."<sup>63</sup> It is these same organizations, as we have seen, that determine the extent of a church's relationships with other churches and expect their members to follow them. It is at this level that the very limited elite or erudite ecumenism is found. By contrast, "magico-religious" faiths are "singularly eclectic in that shrines and cults move easily from place to place." In other words, without objectifying the faith through the written or printed word, these faiths are enormously fluid and localized. As a result, they are also "more universalistic" and less "particularistic." They simply lack the cultural mechanism for establishing nuanced dogma regarding belief and practice.<sup>64</sup>

Ong and Schultze suggest seven salient features of oral cultures: "powerful immediacy, presentness, playfulness, performance, parabolic morality, conventionality, and commonality."<sup>65</sup> Three of these features are especially relevant to the subject at hand:

*Immediacy and presentness.* Pentecostals experience the faith not principally as a set of objective doctrines or abstract theological tenets, but as a living, dynamic work of the Holy Spirit in their everyday lives.<sup>66</sup> Since there is no place in oral religiosity "for the major questions and concerns of the modern West and Enlightenment worldviews,"<sup>67</sup> it follows that decisions regarding human relationships are not determined primarily by theoretical considerations such as proof

texts, purity of doctrine, religious affiliation, ecclesiastical polity, or conciliar pronouncements but by more immediate factors.

*Commonality.* Perhaps the most obvious and significant characteristic of an oral culture is the high level of shared life." The Latin root of the word "communication" signifies "to make common." Commonality is a matter of common experience as well as proximity. Schultze observes that although various students of Pentecostalism point to one or another positive effect of the movement, few seem to see "the direct relationship between orality and the resurrection of community in the region." One of Pentecostalism's major contributions to Latin America "is a widespread resuscitation of social bonds through spiritual language.... Using the language of the people, free of ecclesiastical intermediaries and status differences, Pentecostalism linguistically helps to empower its adherents to build community." The sociology of religion offers a helpful insight at this point. In nonstructured religions, "the religious subject is the group and one's individuality can find expression only in the group," but structured religions tend to personalize religious relationships. They offer solace to every person because they are primarily oriented toward individuals.<sup>69</sup>

Immediacy, presentness, and commonality – in short, communication – is what relationships between Christians and between them and the world are all about. Pentecostals are either in fact or potentially ecumenical because their culture and religion are primarily oral. The more they move toward the literate pole, the more sectarian they tend to be, until they break out into the world of the literate elite, where formal ecumenism can take place in certain contexts. The majority of Pentecostals, however, remain suspicious of formal ecumenism.

Why is this? Again, the sociology of religion may offer us insight. Popular or oral religiosity does not automatically make for open relationships. The source of the religious experience is also very important. "There is an 'ecstatic' source of religion (which is at the same time ethically 'closed') and another 'dynamic' religious source which is ethically 'open.'"<sup>70</sup> I interpret this to mean, in the context of this study, that the historical circumstances behind the beginnings of the various Pentecostal churches – whether "ecstatic" withdrawal or "dynamic" response – may have something to do with the way in which they manage their relationships to other churches and to the world at large.

### *Conclusion*

Pentecostals in Latin America are not inherently sectarian, because unity is germane to their pneumatic theology. They are inherently ecumenical because of their rootedness in oral culture, which is highly relational. Although many of them are suspicious of anything ecumenical, Pentecostals demonstrate varying degrees of formal and informal ecumenism. The most significant and for religious leaders most disquieting manifestations of ecumenism are to be found among the very poor and in the midst of revitalized traditional cultures. This is

a function of cultural identity and daily existence rather than of structure, liturgy, and dogma. In sum, Pentecostals in Latin America are as ecumenical – and as eclectic – as their origins, culture, context, and doctrine either allow or encourage them to be.

## NOTES

1. I develop this further in Guillermo Cook, ed., *New Face of the Church in Latin America: Between Tradition and Change* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994).
2. Everett Wilson, "Latin American Pentecostals: Their Potential for Ecumenical Dialogue," *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 9, 1 (1987), p. 87.
3. Miriam Reidy, "Latin American Pentecostalism: Sleeping Giant," *One World* (May 1988), p. 6.
4. I endorse Donald Dayton's insistence that Pentecostalism is far more than a North American religious phenomenon. It has its roots in many traditions, including German Pietism, English Methodism, and the Swedish free-church movement. Donald Dayton, "Algunas reflexiones sobre el Pentecostalismo latinoamericano y sus implicaciones ecuménicas," *Cuadernos de Teología* 11, 2 (1991), p. 7.
5. Gordon Spykman et al., *Let My People Live: Faith and Struggle in Central America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 78.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 216, 221, 222.
7. David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1990).
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 284 ff.
9. David Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
10. Martin, *Tongues of Fire*, pp. 235, 237. Donald Dayton agrees: "It is not useful to think of Pentecostalism primarily as a sect.' Whereas one can understand the motives behind such labeling coming from a Roman Catholic church that is losing its grip on the masses, "one cannot understand why some Latin American Protestants use the same kind of analysis." Mainline Protestantist denominations in Latin America began as sects. "It is easy to forget," says Dayton, "that Methodists were seen (by Presbyterians for example) in the nineteenth century in the same way that Pentecostals are now looked down upon by Methodists." Dayton, "Algunas reflexiones sobre el Pentecostalismo latinoamericano," p. 8. One might add that the majority of the historical churches that entered Latin America, mostly via the United States (e.g., Scottish Presbyterians, English Congregationalists and Methodists, Baptists, and even Pietist Lutherans), originated in persecuted sectarian movements. See Guillermo Cook, *The Expectation of the Poor: Latin American Base Ecclesial Communities in Protestant Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985).
11. *Ibid.*, p. 229.
12. César Soriano, "La misión del Pentecostalismo latinoamericano en la construcción de la esperanza," paper presented at the Latin American Pentecostal Conference, Buenos Aires, Argentina, April 19-22, 1989.
13. Miguel A. Petrella, "La misión del Pentecostalismo latinoamericano en la construcción de la esperanza," paper presented at the Latin American Pentecostal Conference, Buenos Aires, Argentina, April 19-22, 1989.

14. Gabriel Vaccaro, *Aportes del Pentecostalismo al movimiento ecuménico* (Quito: Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias [CLAI], 1991), pp. 13-20.
15. Ibid.
16. P. A. Hardiment, "Confessing the Apostolic Faith from the Perspective of the Pentecostal Churches," *One in Christ* 23, 1-2, (1987), p. 67; Karl-Wilhelm Westmeir, "Themes in Pentecostal Expansion in Latin America," *International Bulletin for Missionary Research* 17, 4 (April 1993), p. 133.
17. John Thomas Nichol, *The Pentecostals* (Plainfield, N.J., Logos, 1966), pp. 219, 220.
18. A major venue for ecumenical dialogue in the United States is the Society for Pentecostal Studies (SPS), which brings together scholars from mainline Pentecostal, ecumenical Protestant, and charismatic Roman Catholic institutions. For example, the SPS's official organ, *Pneuma*, has published nuanced articles in which Pentecostal authors interact both appreciatively and critically with the Catholic base ecclesial communities.
19. Cheryl Bridges Johns, "The Adolescence of Pentecostalism: Searching for a Legitimate Sectarian Identity," *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 16, 2 (1994), passim.
20. Ibid.
21. Carmelo Alvarez, "Latin American Pentecostals: Ecumenical and Evangelical," *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 9, 1 (1987) p. 92.
22. Up until the 1970s, *evangélico* was equivalent to *Protestante* in Latin America. Although Catholics and ecumenicals use it as an adjective to signify attitudes and actions that harmonize with Gospel principles and ideals, conservative Protestants now use it as a self-designation in the North American sense.
23. Ibid.
24. Alvarez, "Latin American Pentecostals," p. 92.
25. Ibid., pp. 93, 94.
26. Philip Berryman, "Evangelicals and Catholics in Mega-Cities," manuscript. This has also been my experience. As I write, I have been teaching a course on ecclesiology at a Pentecostal institute some of whose students have also taken courses at Catholic and Protestant ecumenical institutions.
27. Guillermo Cook, "Book Summary: *Os deuses do povo* (The Gods of the People), by Carlos Rodriguez Brandão," *Missiology: An International Review* 18, 2 (April 1982), passim.
28. Guillermo Cook, "The Church, the World, and Progress in Latin America in Light of the Eschatological Kingdom," in Harold D. Hunter and Peter D. Hocken, eds., *All Together in One Place: Theological Papers from the Brighton Conference on World Evangelization* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 202-203.
29. Wilson, "Latin American Pentecostals," p. 86.
30. See, for example, Juan Sepúlveda, "Pentecostalism and Liberation Theology," and Luis Segreda, "Evangelization and the Holy Spirit in an Urban and Multicultural Society," in Hunter and Hocken, *All Together in One Place*, pp. 51-64, 134-149.
31. Fidencio Burgeño, "Consultation on Pentecostalism and Liberation Theology," in *CELEP, a Decade in the Service of Jesus Christ: Documents on the Life and Mission of the Church* (San José, Costa Rica: Centro Evangélico Latinoamericano de Estudios Pastorales, 1985), pp. 150-155.
32. UEPV, "La carta de Valencia: Carta pastoral de la Unión Evangélica Pentecostal Venezolana," manuscript, 1987.
33. Ibid.

34. Jonathan L. Fried and Marvin Gettleman, eds., "Religion and Revolution: A Protestant Voice," in *Guatemala in Rebellion: Unfinished History* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), pp. 230-231.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 231.
36. For a more detailed treatment of this phenomenon, see Guillermo Cook, "The Genesis and Practice of Protestant Base Communities in Latin America," in Cook, *New Face*, pp. 150-155.
37. Carlos Rodrigues Brandão, a Brazilian social scientist, has found that grass-roots Pentecostals partake of the same community solidarity as the Catholic base communities. This is an integral part of their world. Brandão, *Os deuses do povo* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Brasilense, 1980), pp. 54-56; see also Cook, *The Expectation of the Poor*, p. 228.
38. Francisco Cartaxo Rolim, *O que é pentecostalismo?* (Sao Paulo: Editora Brasilense, 1987), pp. 51-70.
39. New York Times, November 17, 1992.
40. Cecilia Mariz, "Religion and Poverty in Brazil: A Comparison of Catholic and Pentecostal Communities," *Sociological Analysis* 53, special issue (1992), p. 63.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
45. CEDI, "Protestantismo autónomo, uma inversão sedutora?" in *Aconteceu no mundo evangélico*, special supplement 548 (1990), pp. 5, 11.
46. Peter Winn, *Americas: The Changing Face of Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), p. 383.
47. *Ibid.*
48. The basic-education movement, pioneered by an intellectual, idealistic, and radical young Catholic Action elite in the 1960s, was one of the sources of the Brazilian CEBs. It gradually developed from a literacy program into a movement that had a growing stake in changing the basic socioeconomic structures of Brazil. Its leadership debated the relative merits of a nondirective versus a directive methodology and eventually chose the latter. See Cook, *The Expectation of the Poor*, esp. pp. 267-268.
49. Cook, *New Face*.
50. *O Estado*, 1993; cf. *Veja*, (1991), pp. 32-38.
51. Brandão, *Os deuses do povo*, pp. 125-127.
52. *Ibid.*
53. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
54. Heinrich Shafer, *Church Identity Between Repression and Liberation: The Presbyterian Church in Guatemala*. (Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, no. 20, 1991), pp. 89, 90.1 substitute "Protestant" for "Presbyterian" to indicate that the same phenomenon exists throughout Maya Protestantism, including Pentecostalism churches.
55. Linda Green, "Shifting Affiliations: Mayan Widows and *Evangélicos* in Guatemala," in Virginia Garrard-Burnett and David Stoll, eds., *Rethinking Protestantism in Latin America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p. 175.
56. Interview by telephone, July 1994, with Church of God missionary, Rev. Richard Waldrop, in Guatemala.
57. Mario Fernando Higueros Fuentes, "Imágenes parentales y familiares en la formación religiosa: Análisis de un país centroamericano," Master's thesis, Facultad de Teología, Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca, 1986.

58. Green, "Shifting Affiliations," p. 175.
59. Ibid.
60. David Stoll, "Introduction," in Garrard-Burnett and Stoll, *Rethinking Protestantism*, p. 6.
61. Cook, "Book Summary," p. 254; cf. Brandão, *Os deuses do poyo*, pp. 109-111, 139-141.
62. Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), and *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982).
63. Quentin J. Schultze, "Orality and Power in Latin American Pentecostalism," in Daniel R. Miller, ed. *Coming of Age: Protestantism in Latin America* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1994), p. 73.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid., p. 73.
66. Ibid., p. 75.
67. Ibid., p. 77.
68. Ibid., 81, 82; cf. Martin, *Tongues of Fire*, pp. 83, 171, 175, 180.
69. J. Gómez Caffarena, "Religión," in Casiano Floristán and Juan José Tamayo, eds., *Conceptos fundamentales de Pastoral* (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1983), p. 864.
70. Gómez Caffarena, "Religión," p. 864. Gómez borrows this concept from Henri Bergson, *Las dos fuentes de la moral y de la religión* (Buenos Aires, n.p., n.d.).