

# Latin America's Fifth Wave of Protestant Churches

Clayton L. Berg, Jr., and Paul E. Pretiz

Visiting a church convention, we found that the Christian mariachi band, silver buckles sparkling on black uniforms, was the high point of the afternoon. Downstairs, huge sides of beef hung from the ceiling. On the fire were enormous pots of mole, the traditional hot sauce. The rhythms, the smells from the kitchen, the preaching style, and the happy confusion made the gathering unmistakably Mexican.

The churches represented here had developed entirely out of Mexican soil, without any involvement of expatriate missionaries. Not only in Mexico but throughout Latin America today, in tents, storefronts, former cinemas, factories, and homes, as well as church buildings, autochthonous congregations are bursting into life by spontaneous combustion. People are coming to know Christ and are sharing the Good News through the ministries of churches entirely independent of traditional mission influence.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Gospel People of Latin America* we identified five waves of Protestant advance, the fifth being the rise of autochthonous, or grassroots, churches.<sup>2</sup> While much missiological literature covers the African Independent Churches, little has been written describing the corresponding phenomenon in the Americas.

By "autochthonous" we mean churches that (1) have developed spontaneously, without a history of missionary involvement; or (2) were planted by missionary efforts of other Latin American autochthonous churches; or (3) were formerly mission related but have broken foreign links and reflect the people's culture in the deepest sense.

The two criteria are autonomy and contextualization. To determine whether churches in the category of "formerly mis-

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sion related" should be considered autochthonous is admittedly difficult because it involves an attempt to measure the degree of contextualization. Many so-called indigenized churches follow the patterns of the parent mission society. But other groups, though formerly mission related, have become truly contextualized and can be considered autochthonous. A case in point is the Methodist Pentecostal Church in Chile. Autonomous since 1909, despite its early Methodist background it is universally recognized as autochthonous because of its contextualization into Chilean life and culture.

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Clayton L. (Mike) Berg, Jr., and Paul E. Pretiz are veteran missionaries with the Latin America Mission. Both have served in a variety of ministries and responsibilities since the 1950s, including Berg as LAM's president and Pretiz as vice president. Their most recent joint work is *Spontaneous Combustion: Grass Roots Christianity, Latin American Style* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1996).

## Estimating Number of Autochthonous Churches

In the *World Christian Encyclopedia* researcher David Barrett identifies "nonwhite indigenous" churches as a separate stream of the world Christian community.<sup>3</sup> Though hardly a proper label for some middle-class Latin American autochthonous churches with some very European-looking people, the churches he identifies as "nonwhite indigenous" in Latin America are the autochthonous churches being addressed in this article.

Most of these churches are considered *evangélico* (or Protestant) in Latin America. On the basis of Barrett's numbers, autochthonous churches in 1980 constituted 40.6 percent of all Protestants in Latin America. The proportions ranged from a meager 2.7 percent in Honduras to 88.9 percent in Chile. Given their rate of growth, they may now represent over half of Latin America's Protestants. The accompanying table, based on more recent surveys, summarizes our own estimates of the number of churches and church members of such autochthonous groups.

Autochthonous Churches and Their Members  
as a Proportion of All Protestant Churches in Latin America

	% of Churches	% of Church Members
Mexico City	55.2	46.6
Medellín, Cali, Cartagena, and Barranquilla, Colombia	30.3	35.7
Lima, Peru	36.6	30.6
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	28.3	—
São Paulo, Brazil	35.3	46.1
Caracas, Venezuela	33.3	—
Buenos Aires, Argentina	24.8	25.8
Guatemala (as a whole)	24.8	25.8

## Origins and Variations

We have spoken of this movement as a "fifth wave" because so many of the churches are of recent origin. However, some have a long history. Perhaps the first autochthonous "churches" in Latin America were the non-Roman Catholic religious societies that Mexican President Benito Juárez promoted in the 1860s. Jean Pierre Bastian describes how the historic Protestant denominations in Mexico in many cases built upon the foundation of these autochthonous groups.<sup>4</sup>

Early in this century a ripple effect from the 1906 Azusa Street Pentecostal revival in southern California gave birth to several movements in Mexico, Puerto Rico, Chile, and Brazil. More recently there have been breakaway groups from historic Protestant churches, notably the charismatic counterparts to each of the major Protestant denominations in Brazil. Former Roman Catholic charismatic groups that have joined the evangelical stream are also among Latin America's autochthonous churches. And many have arisen spontaneously, such as the Apure movement, founded by Aristides Díaz, a Venezuelan cattle dealer who experienced a conversion after purchasing a Bible from a colporteur.

As Ed Rene Kivitz, a Baptist pastor in São Paulo, has ob-

served, older movements tend to be sectarian, isolating themselves from other Protestants.<sup>5</sup> They may sacralize their worship patterns or even their hymnals, not admitting any innovation. Rigid rules may result in legalistic behavior. The Congregação Cristã of Brazil is an example. Newer movements may feature contemporary music (sometimes including Christian rock), make heavy use of mass media, and be more permissive in what is expected of their followers' behavior. Groups such as the Brazilian Renacer em Cristo are attracting many young people. They often have loose ties to similar groups elsewhere, sometimes adopting current trends such as "health and prosperity" concepts. The Ondas de Amor y Paz (Waves of love and peace) movement in Argentina is another example.

There are other variants—for example, the Apostolic Church of Faith in Christ Jesus (Mexico), which follows the Pentecostal oneness stream regarding the Trinity; the Israelites of the New Covenant (Peru), which observes Old Testament feasts and sacrifices; and the Mitas (Puerto Rico), whose founder claimed to be the incarnation of the Holy Spirit. Because of the pervasive influence of spiritism, many movements in Brazil (e.g., the God Is Love Church) emphasize exorcism. Critics feel that this focus, by overshadowing other aspects of Christian faith, weakens Christian moral responsibility. Everything evil is blamed on demons, and every solution is found in exorcism.

The highly centralized authority of some groups permits them to concentrate their financial power to buy up TV and radio stations to proclaim their message, and to purchase cinemas where their congregations can meet. The Igreja Universal del Reino de Deus (Universal church of the kingdom of God), in Brazil, is a prime example.

Despite the aberrations of some groups, most Latin American autochthonous movements form a part of the *evangélico* stream and relate well to other Protestant denominations. The

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largest autochthonous single congregation in Latin America may be the Brazil for Christ Church in São Paulo, with a hangerlike building seating more than 20,000 people. The founder, Manoel de Mello, broke with Pentecostal tradition by relating to the World Council of Churches, promoting favored political candidates, and displaying a social concern atypical of Pentecostals of his time. His son, pastor Paulo Lutero de Mello, is less involved ecumenically and politically, but he continues to mix a strong social concern with his evangelistic ministry.

### Breaking the Stereotypes

Latin American Protestants traditionally have been accused of subverting Latin America's unity by introducing religious forms that run counter to Latin culture. Traditional Protestants may well stand accused of such foreignness. But the autochthonous churches—with their rhythms, charismatic leaders, passion, personal sacrifice, and openness to the miraculous—are not only highly contextualized but, according to some, may be more

attuned to the region's culture than traditional Roman Catholicism.<sup>6</sup>

Another charge is that Latin Pentecostalism (most autochthonous groups are Pentecostal) serves merely as an escape from the harsh realities of life faced by Latin America's poor. Christian LaLive's *Haven of the Masses* perceived these Christians as being on "social strike," refusing to participate in community or political efforts that might improve their lot and the lot of their neighbors.<sup>7</sup> But the title of a recent book by a group of Dutch anthropologists signals a change in the perspectives of some observers. Describing current Latin American Pentecostalism, they call it *algo más que opio* ("something more than an opiate").<sup>8</sup> In addition to the improvement in individuals' lives, the Gospel as preached in these churches is becoming a force that is beginning to affect society.<sup>9</sup>

Not only are social scientists turning around in their judgments. Latin America's evangelicals themselves, especially those in autochthonous churches, are changing as they abandon the "politics is sinful" posture. Although their political forays are sometimes naive, as their numbers grow and as Latin American countries are generally recovering democratic systems of government, *evangélicos* are increasingly forming their own evangelical parties and supporting candidates that represent their views.

### A Protestant "Popular Religion"

In recent years Catholic folk religion—*religiosidad popular* ("popular religiosity," as it is known in Latin America)—has received much attention and analysis. Far from lofty philosophical and theological heights of official Catholicism, and equally far from the politically radical views of liberation theology, the down-to-earth practice of Latin America's masses revolves around tangible practices and objects such as pilgrimages to shrines, religious fiestas, water from sacred springs, and objects with curative powers. Some look with disdain upon this popular religion. Others countenance *religiosidad popular* and hold in prospect the possibility of building upon it to lift the masses to a higher and more spiritual faith.

It has not escaped the attention of many that Latin America's autochthonous Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on cures and material blessings, may be a Protestant equivalent of Catholic popular religiosity. Observers share the same contrasting perspectives—disdain or appreciation. Some see only the crude manifestations of Protestant "popular religiosity"; others, thanking God that the masses are being reached, anticipate a growing maturity in these movements.

The charges that Protestant autochthonous movements are susceptible to syncretistic influences is countered by some autochthonous leaders who draw attention to syncretistic "Romish" influences in the historic Protestant churches. Such leaders also point out that historic churches in Latin America pay little attention to the demonic and may easily overlook the persistent superstitious or even occult practices of their members. Autochthonous groups, in contrast, recognize the existence of the spirit world and demand that new converts renounce all non-Christian practices.

### A Missiological Challenge

Churches arising through "spontaneous combustion" pose questions regarding our missiological task. Since an average of five new evangelical churches are founded each week in Rio de

Janeiro, for example,<sup>10</sup> many of them by groups unrelated to expatriate mission, is there a need for missionaries from the outside? In such cities missions obviously must realign their priorities. Among other things, they can focus on planting churches that can be models of worship and outreach for social and ethnic groups that autochthonous churches may not yet be reaching.

The best of the autochthonous movements are models for mission-related movements, and we can profit by studying their patterns of growth and their forms of contextualization. Such studies should not be limited to superficial observations of their musical styles and worship forms. The real issue is whether mission-related churches can understand and adopt the best of a pre-Enlightenment worldview that is common to the masses in Latin America. This is a view that is open to the miraculous, to God's intervention in daily experience, to biblical confrontation with the demonic, and to a focus in worship that emphasizes reveling in God's presence rather than passive participation in a cerebrally oriented service.

At the same time, traditional churches and missions can share their theological experience with autochthonous leaders. The lay pastor of the small autochthonous storefront church may be too busy because of his secular employment, or too embarrassed because of his lack of preparation, to enroll in a formal program of theological education. The leader of a large movement may feel too self-sufficient to bother. But sharing of literature and tapes, developing personal friendships, conducting short workshops and courses, as well as offering more traditional academic programs at the appropriate time and place, are ways to overcome such barriers. The Pentecostal Bible Institute of Santiago, Chile, is directed by a missionary sensitive to the situation of autochthonous church leaders, and the institute meets an evident need. The Mennonites' experience working with African Independent Churches demonstrates that the missionary task should be more than just "planting more churches of our own kind."<sup>11</sup> Missions and missionary preparation should develop a concern to relate to other parts of the body of Christ, especially the autochthonous movements, without creating dependency and without de-indigenizing them.

The cutting edge of the church is often at the social and

religious periphery, notably so in these autochthonous movements. But as many believers move upward socially and educationally, their spiritual needs often require the depth that more traditional churches offer. In one country pastors affirmed that much of the growth in the traditional churches was due to people whose initial contact with the Gospel was in autochthonous churches, and who came to the traditional churches looking for other spiritual values. To prepare the pastors of autochthonous churches for the changing needs of their members is a task that could conceivably be assumed by the older churches—but in humility, since not many traditional churches have learned to cope with the pressures of modern society and secularism.

Autochthonous movements by nature are expansionist. Brazilian groups are sending missionaries to Africa. Those in Spanish-speaking countries are opening churches in North America.

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## Issues arising out of folk religions may be central in missiology in the twenty-first century.

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Somehow we must learn to tap into the energy of these movements as evangelistic efforts are contemplated, whether on a local or on a worldwide level. In some places organizers of citywide evangelistic movements discover that autochthonous churches, because they are not bound rigidly to a denominational program, make more enthusiastic participants than traditional churches. We should not ignore autochthonous church leaders in our plans for global evangelism or in our invitation lists for evangelistic or missiological congresses.

We cannot ignore autochthonous churches as we look at the future world scene. Given their growth, they are the wave that will become increasingly prominent.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as Paul Hiebert has stated, "There is a growing awareness among mission leaders that these issues arising out of the folk religions may be central in missiology in the twenty-first century."<sup>13</sup>

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## Notes

1. Adapted from Clayton L. Berg, Jr., and Paul Pretiz, *Spontaneous Combustion: Grass Roots Christianity, Latin American Style* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1996), p. 11.
2. Clayton L. Berg, Jr., and Paul Pretiz, *The Gospel People of Latin America* (Monrovia, Calif.: MARC/LAM, 1992). The five waves are (1) the Protestant churches that entered with nineteenth-century immigrants; (2) the entry of the conciliar or historic denominations; (3) churches that are the fruit of "faith missions"; (4) missions of newer denominations, mostly Pentecostal; and (5) the autochthonous churches.
3. David B. Barrett, ed., *World Christian Encyclopedia* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982).
4. Jean Pierre Bastian, *Los disidentes: Sociedades protestantes y revolución en México, 1872-1911* (México D.F.: El Colegio de México, 1989).
5. Ed Rene Kivitz, pastor of the Agua Branca Baptist Church, São Paulo, Brazil, 1994.
6. Karl-Wilhelm Westmeier quotes two Latin Americans, Samuel Palma and Hugo Villela, who affirm that "official Roman Catholicism actually runs counter to the religious feeling of the Latin American masses" ("Themes of Pentecostal Expansion in Latin America," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 17 [April 1993]: 76).
7. Christian LaLive d'Épinay, *The Haven of the Masses* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969).
8. Barbara Boudewijnse, André Droogers, and Frans Kamsteeg, *Algo más que opio* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial DEI, 1991).
9. David Martin, *Tongues of Fire* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).
10. Rubem Cesar Fernandes, *Censo Institucional Evangélico CIN 1992* (Rio de Janeiro: ISER, 1992).
11. David A. Shenk, ed., *Ministry of Missions to African Independent Churches* (1987) and *Ministry in Partnership with African Independent Churches* (1991), both published by the Mennonite Board of Missions, Elkhart, Indiana.
12. David Barrett's projection of the year 2025 places "nonwhite indigenus" at more than a third of all Protestants and nonwhite indigenus Christians combined (*International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20 [January 1996]: 24-25).
13. Paul G. Hiebert, "Popular Religions," in *Toward the Twenty-first Century in Christian Mission*, ed. James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 254ff.