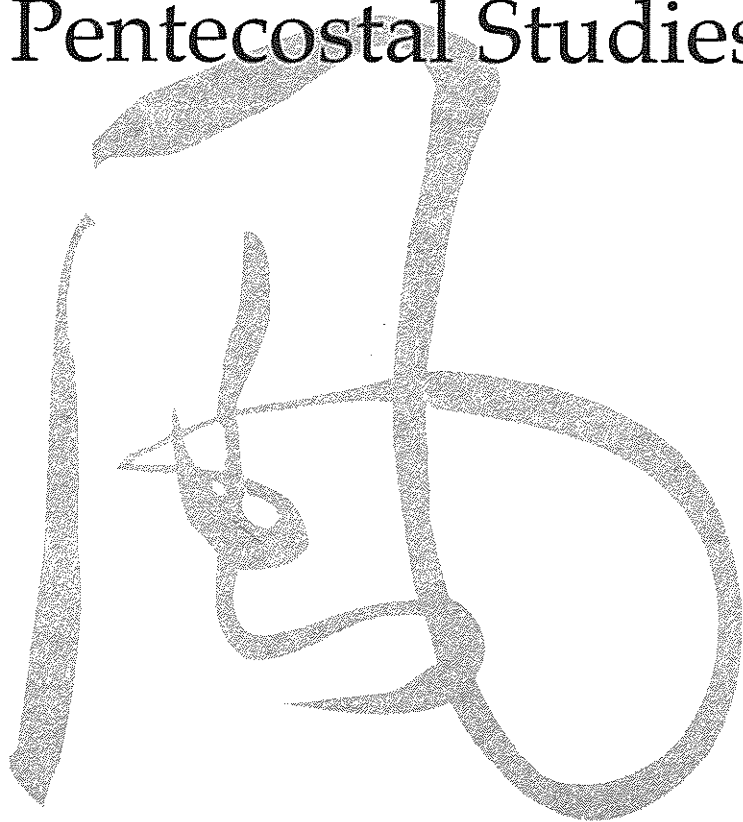


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## LATIN AMERICAN PENTECOSTAL GROWTH: CULTURE, ORALITY AND THE POWER OF TESTIMONIES<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. Introduction

In recent decades Latin American societies have undergone a host of profound social, cultural, political, economic, and religious changes. This paper examines one of the most important aspects of these social transformations with special emphasis on the autochthonous religious characteristics of Pentecostalism, seeking to interpret them as well as envision future consequences. It will begin with a brief general exploration of the characteristics of Pentecostalism and later with general features of Pentecostalism throughout Latin America, while also considering contributions made from communication and cultural studies. This will provide a background and set a conceptual framework for analyses of the characteristics of Latin American Pentecostal communications.

### 2. Latin American Scene

One of the most extraordinary religious transformations in history has taken place during the twentieth century in Latin America. In fact, in the 1900s almost all Latin Americans were Roman Catholics. However, more recently, as Valentín Gonzalez-Bohorquez claims, it is estimated that “11% of Latin Americans are evangelicals” and about “40 % of all the members of Pentecostal denominations are in Latin America.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is a substantially revised edition of the paper presented at the International Symposium on Non-western Pentecostalism, May 2001, Anaheim, CA, USA.

<sup>2</sup> Valentín Gonzalez-Bohorquez, *Latin America: A Continent on Fire* (www.ad2000.org/gcowe95/gonz.html, May 7, 2001).

Although numbers may differ, the growth of Evangelicals within the Latin American population, particular the growth of Pentecostals, has been incredible. Manuel J. Gaxiola-Gaxiola colorfully describes Latin American Protestantism as being “in indeed a multicolored mosaic, a prism that reflects many hues and shades, a never-ending succession of peoples, places, and practices that gives Latin American Protestantism a special personality and color. And then...there are the Pentecostals.”<sup>3</sup>

As some authors claim—not without facing counter-arguments<sup>4</sup>—Pentecostalism was initially a North American export to the Latin American context. It was born out of the conviction that the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the miracles of divine healing and the supernatural gifts of the Spirit were designed by God “to empower his people for the task of world-wide evangelization.”<sup>5</sup> Pentecostalism rapidly found in the Latin American context propitious conditions where it developed and grew to become the incredible force it is today. David Stoll claims that between 1960 and 1985 Pentecostalism doubled its size in Chile, Paraguay, Venezuela, Panama and Haiti. It tripled its size in Argentina, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic. It quadrupled in Brazil and Puerto Rico, quintupled in El Salvador, Costa Rica, Peru and Bolivia, and sextupled in Guatemala, Honduras, Ecuador and Colombia.<sup>6</sup> Such a growth brought with it a variety of Pentecostal doctrine and practices and diversity among its members. David Barrett characterizes the world-wide Pentecostal/Charismatic movement as being more urban than rural, more female than male, more third world than western world, more impoverished than affluent, more family oriented than individualistic,

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<sup>3</sup> Manuel J. Gaxiola-Gaxiola, “Latin American Pentecostalism: A Mosaic within a Mosaic,” *Pneuma* 13:2 (Fall, 1991), pp. 107-29 (114).

<sup>4</sup> The vast majority of research available done on Pentecostalism comes from the USA, and therefore, this approach is taken as granted. However, it is my presumption that as Pentecostals from around the world research on the origins of Pentecostalism this trend would tend to weaken. See also the writing of the missiologist Paul A. Pomerville, *The Third Force in Missions* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985), p. 52 and also pp. 42-62, who argues that Pentecostalism was birthed by a series of roughly spontaneous global outpourings of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>5</sup> Murray W. Dempster, “The Search for Pentecostal Identity,” *Pneuma* 15:1 (Spring, 1993), pp. 1-8 (1).

<sup>6</sup> David Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 8-9 and also review in pp. 189-90.

and in general, comprised by people under eighteen years old<sup>7</sup> and Latin American Pentecostalism is not the exception. It mainly includes a majority of females as well as young people who are generally poor and collectivistically oriented. According to Roger Cabezas, this can be viewed as a blessing and hope, or, as “a dangerous conspiracy undermining the processes of change and the search for solutions to the principal social, economic and political problems of Latin America and the Caribbean.”<sup>8</sup> As we already find ourselves in a new century, it is appropriate to question what are the challenges related to distinguishing Pentecostal communication today. How did this growth happen and what were the elements involved in the process? What communication strategies and styles were used in bringing this change? These are questions that challenge us in times when, despite having such growth, the region “still operates in several self-destructive ways.”<sup>9</sup> These questions are shaped by the necessity of having deeper impact on society as a whole and by the necessity of reclaiming, reinforcing, and challenging the distinctive characteristics of Pentecostals’ communication.

### 3. Seeking the Voices of Our Identity

Faupel points out that Pentecostalism will define its identity and its mission “through the constructions of a historical narrative.”<sup>10</sup> In constructing a historical narrative we have the elements present in the early expansion of the Pentecostal faith. In this regard, Robeck claims that Pentecostalism in our lands developed “with the aid of personal correspondence, early Pentecostal publications, personal testimonies, and

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<sup>7</sup> David B. Barrett, “The Twentieth Century Pentecostal/Charismatic Renewal in the Holy Spirit, with Its Goal of World Evangelization,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 12 (July 1988), pp. 119-29.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Cabezas, “The experience of the Latin American Pentecostal Encuentro,” *Pneuma* 13:2 (Fall, 1991), pp. 175-188 (175).

<sup>9</sup> Pedro Moreno, “Rapture and Renewal in Latin America,” *First Things* 74 (June/July 1997), pp. 31-34 (<http://www.leaderu.com/ftissues/ft9706/articles/moreno.html>, May 5, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> William Faupel, “Whither Pentecostalism?” *Pneuma* 15:1 (Spring, 1993), pp. 9-27.

missionary activity.”<sup>11</sup> In other words communication in its different manifestations was at the core of the Pentecostal faith and its expansion. So what was so appealing in letters, testimonies, written material and the like in the communication of the Pentecostal message?

#### 4. Principal Tenets of Pentecostalism

The appealing of the Pentecostal message it is found in the foundational beliefs of Pentecostalism. The early Pentecostals of the twentieth century considered themselves as God’s end-time people, who by his grace, were 1) saved, 2) sanctified and 3) baptized in the Holy Spirit. They were people whose identity was profoundly shaped by an eschatological intensity and uttermost identification with the “full gospel” of the New Testament.

However it is not only what Pentecostals believed what made them attractive, but also their practices. In relation to the prominent practices of Pentecostalism, Harvey Cox points out five positive tendencies. He notes that Pentecostalism has: 1) spirituality centered on experience; 2) worship that is celebrative; 3) practicality in the way Christianity is lived; 4) impulse towards social criticism of convoluted values, beliefs, and practices that impoverish people’s lives and systematically support oppressive structures and evil practices; and 5) power to generate the ideals of an inclusive Christian community (gender, ethnicity, and race). Bernardo Campos suggests almost the same characteristics when discussing Pentecostalism in Latin America. Campos says that Latin American Pentecostalism is: 1) a movement of spirituality, that is characterized by having a religious experience with the divine; 2) a movement of protest, which means that Pentecostal morals and ethics respond to social irregularities and accompany processes of immigration, industrialization, and urbanism; and 3) a movement of social change, since it is a movement opened to new social practices.<sup>12</sup>

Besides, it is not only what today’s Pentecostals believe and practice that makes them revolutionaries of faith, but more importantly who they are. They are believers who identify themselves with the poor, the

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<sup>11</sup> Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., “Southern Religion with a Latin Accent,” *Pneuma* 13:2 (Fall, 1991), pp. 101-106 (101).

<sup>12</sup> Bernardo L. Campos, “El Pentecostalismo, En la Fuerza del Espíritu,” *Cyberjournal for Pentecostal Charismatic Research* 9 (Feb, 2001) at <http://pctii.org/cyberj/campos.html> (March 23, 2001).

marginalized, and those who suffer,<sup>13</sup> and a popular movement, that it is socially based on people.

From these characterizations, it is possible to understand Pentecostalism as a spiritual movement with a solid set of beliefs and a diverse social movement with a profound contact and sensitivity to the community.<sup>14</sup>

From a communication stand point, it is having people as central that partially accounts for the success of the Pentecostal message. This position does not ignore the Holy Spirit's work in Latin America but tries to offer a model for explaining Pentecostal growth in Latin America as well as pointing out issues that are relevant for the communication of the Pentecostal message in the twenty-first century.

### 5. Latin American Pentecostalism

If Pentecostalism can be characterized as a diverse social movement with a profound contact and sensitivity to the community,<sup>15</sup> its relationship with the local culture cannot be ignored. James Goff, Jr. says, "by default, Pentecostalism was allowed to adapt itself to local culture and worship patterns. It became the religion of the people wherever its message spread."<sup>16</sup> Pentecostalism in Latin America was and still is a popular movement, and, therefore, the communication of the Pentecostal message in this context is multicultural and popular in its essence. However as Sergio Matviuk argues, it is necessary to develop a "framework to understand what cultural dimensions of the local culture

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<sup>13</sup> Harvey G. Cox, Jr., "Some Personal Reflections on Pentecostalism," *Pneuma* 15:1 (Spring, 1993), pp. 29-34.

<sup>14</sup> Douglas Petersen, *No Con Ejército, Ni Con Fuerza* [Not by Might Nor by Power] (Miami: Editorial Vida, 1996), p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> Petersen, *No Con Ejército*, p. 17 argues that Pentecostalism has mostly acquired its strength among the weakest or unsatisfied sectors of Latin America, such as the peasants, urban poor, women, Indians, ethnic minorities, young adults and groups from the middle class. This reality is opposed to many Pentecostal stereotypes that describe Latin American Pentecostalism as a generator of passive attitudes among its followers, encouraging them to think only in eternity and to accept the status quo. What is occurring demonstrates that Latin American Pentecostals are committed to social struggles in the here and now.

<sup>16</sup> James R. Goff, Jr., "Closing out the Church Age: Pentecostals Face the Twenty-First Century," *Pneuma* 14 (Spring, 1992), pp. 7-21 (19).

have been integrated with Pentecostal beliefs to foster the tremendous growth of Latin American Pentecostalism.”<sup>17</sup>

Since Pentecostalism mainly is a popular movement, it is no surprise that researchers found Latin American Pentecostalism to be “autochthonous in its character.”<sup>18</sup> Westmeier agrees with this affirmation and claims that “Latin American Pentecostalism is an expression of folk religion.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, Pentecostalism is profoundly rooted in the essential aspects of local culture. Culture is a term that means various things to different people, but it will be kept very simple here despite the complexities it involves. Culture, as defined by Geertz, “denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.”<sup>20</sup> This way of understanding culture emphasizes its symbolic practices carried out through communication. Hofstede defines culture as the “collective programming of the mind,” that is, patterns of thinking, feeling, and potential acting within the mind, and as “interactive aggregate of common characteristics that influence a human group’s response to its environment.”<sup>21</sup> So, what are these “historical transmitted patterns,” according to Geertz or, “this software of the mind” in Hofstede’s terms, inherent to Latin American culture that melted with the communication of the Pentecostal message?

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<sup>17</sup> Sergio Matviuk, “Pentecostal Leadership Development and Church Growth in Latin America,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 5:1 (January 2002), pp. 155-72.

<sup>18</sup> Luise Margolies, “The Paradoxical Growth of Pentecostalism,” in *Perspectives on Pentecostalism: Case Studies from the Caribbean and Latin America*, ed. Stephen Glazier (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980), pp. 1-5 (1).

<sup>19</sup> See K. Westmeier, “Themes of Pentecostal Expansion in Latin America,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 17:2 (1999), pp. 72-78.

<sup>20</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 89.

<sup>21</sup> Geertz Hofstede, *Culture’s Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1984), p. 21.

## 6. Latin American Culture and Pentecostalism

The first element we have in common between Latin American culture and Pentecostalism is experience. Latin American culture has been characterized as an experience in which faith and life are inseparable. Joseph Fitzpatrick points out that this feature was “true of indigenous peoples before the time of Christianity in their elemental sense of the sacred.”<sup>22</sup> In fact, life for indigenous people was essentially religious. With the conquest, the religious quality became “Christianized.” Thus, Catholicism transferred this sense of the sacred into an official religion. In consequence, a fundamental concept within the Latin American world-view is that of God. “For Latinos, God is not so much a concept, as an experience.”<sup>23</sup> In deed, the Spanish language reflects this enmeshment of religion and ordinary life with expressions that convey the collective belief in God and the acceptance of God’s reality. Expressions such as “Vaya con Dios” (Go with God), “Que Dios se lo pague” (May God reward you), “Que sea la voluntad de Dios” (Let it be God’s will), and “Si Dios quiere” (If God wants it) are examples of the pervasiveness religion. However, the mere use of these expressions does not mean that someone is a believer, rather that they are “bespeak to the religious sensitivity within the culture and to the collective consciousness of the people.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, Latin American Pentecostalism re-injected sacredness and transcendence of the religious experience. Sacredness and transcendence that were not related to the official religion. This is why, among other reasons, Latin American Pentecostalism embraced social change, since it is a movement opened to new social practices including rituals, liturgy, worshiping and to the involvement of the believer in these acts. The second element we find in common in the relationship Latin culture and Pentecostalism is the focus on the event. Marvin Mayer says that event is a value within the Latin American culture, and describes it as follows, “the event oriented person is interested in who’s there, what’s going on, and how one can embellish the event with sound, color, light, body movement, touch, etc. He [a

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<sup>22</sup> Joseph Fitzpatrick, S.J., *One Church Many Cultures: The Challenge of Diversity* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1987), p. 135.

<sup>23</sup> Rosendo Urrabazo, “Therapeutic Sensitivity to the Latino Spiritual Soul,” in *Family Therapy with Hispanics: Toward Appreciating Diversity*, eds. M. Flores and G. Carey (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2000), pp. 205-28 (213).

<sup>24</sup> Urrabazo, “Therapeutic Sensitivity to the Latino Spiritual Soul,” p. 213.



Latin American] is less interested in time and schedule.”<sup>25</sup> The elements included by Meyer as part of the “event orientation” take a very visible presence in the Pentecostal service.

The gesture comes first. Later, the words. And one legitimizes the other in a constant reciprocity. Something new always happens. The expectation is fulfilled. Apparently nobody leaves the Pentecostal service frustrated, no matter how well they know the ritual, the songs, the altar calls the message, the offerings. What happens in the pulpit (on stage) is only the first act. Next the whole auditorium becomes a stage of action. The roles are switched momentarily: the pastor becomes the attendant, a spectator of the ecstasy that fills the souls and bodies of the crowded hall with personal and collective manifestations.<sup>26</sup>

Samuel Escobar affirms that in the traditional Pentecostal experience the ascetic life-style included in conversion “was also accompanied by a celebrative form of worship and communal life that was a great help for the endurance among the converted.”<sup>27</sup> This celebration and communal life is highly participatory. This is to say borrowing Warren’s expression, that religion as a zone of signification, is a culture which “exists within the wider culture and takes many of its human values from that culture.”<sup>28</sup> Robert Blank’s concepts affirm this idea of interrelationship between religion and culture. Blank states that the work and strategy of Latin American Pentecostalism reflects its “cultural origin and heritage,”<sup>29</sup> which supports the integration of Latin American Pentecostalism with the cultural values of Latin Americans as a whole. For some, this integration threatens the Protestant heritage and the sixteenth century concept of *sola scriptura*, because now Pentecostal churches have “syncretistic practices that incorporate aspects of the very

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<sup>25</sup> Marvin K. Meyers, *A Look at Latin American Lifestyles* (Summer Institute of Linguistics, Museum of Anthropology, 1976), p. 91.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Shaul and Waldo Cesar, *Pentecostalism and the Future of the Christian Churches: Promises, Limitations, Challenges* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> J. Samuel Escobar, “A Missiological Approach to Latin American Protestantism,” *International Review of Mission* 87 (1987), pp. 161-73 (162).

<sup>28</sup> Michael Warren, *Seeing through the Media: A Religious View of Communications and Cultural Analysis* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1992), p. 21.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Blank, *Teología y Misión en América Latina* [Theology and Mission in Latin America] (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1996), p. 213.

popular religiosity that evangelical churches used to combat.”<sup>30</sup> For others, this acculturation brought a negative socio-political impact on the society because despite having such growth, the region “still operates in several self-destructive ways,”<sup>31</sup> yet numerous studies suggest that Pentecostal congregations have become a way for reforming themselves, their relations to each other, and their relations to society.<sup>32</sup> So the challenge that remains in the face of acculturation is a self-actualization of such a process so that the Pentecostal message will be communicated to the generations to come. And this is an area that Latin American Pentecostals being part of a diverse movement open to new practices have to struggle with in order not to become attached to a fixed set of meaningless practices.

## 7. Pentecostal Communication

Although all “communication involves the use of shared symbols”<sup>33</sup> (that is, arbitrary, agreed-upon meaning), it is religious communication that *par excellence* assumes shared symbol system since as Peter Roche de Coppens says, “symbols are the language and the vehicles of the supernatural. They deal with intuition, imagination and emotion rather than with thinking, sensations or the will.”<sup>34</sup> Pentecostal worship and liturgy constitute an excellent display of communication and within it, testimonies.

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<sup>30</sup> Phillip Berryman, *Religion in the Megacity: Catholic and Protestant Portraits from Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis, 1996), especially ch. 3, “Effectiveness and Authenticity. Facts and Questions about Evangelical Growth” (pp. 41-51).

<sup>31</sup> Pedro Moreno, “Rapture and Renewal in Latin America,” *First Things* 74 (June/July 1997), pp. 31-34 at <http://www.leaderu.com/ftissues/ft9706/articles/moreno.html> (March 7, 2001).

<sup>32</sup> See Petersen, *No Con Ejército*; Emilio Willems, *Followers of the New Faith* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967); Douglas Brintnall, *Revolt against the Dead: The Modernization of a Mayan Community in the Highlands of Guatemala* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1979); Carlos Garma Navarro, *Protestantismo en una Comunidad Totonaca de Puebla* (Mexico, D. F.: Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 1987).

<sup>33</sup> J. N. Martin, and T. K. Nakayama, *Intercultural Communication in Contexts* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1997), pp. 51-52.

<sup>34</sup> See Peter Roche de Coppens, *The Nature and Use of Ritual* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1979), p. 137.

Grimes argues that Pentecostal's ritual field is comprised ritual space, time, objects, sounds and language, identities or roles, and actions, behaviors and gestures which interact and overlap with each other.<sup>35</sup> Daniel Albertch adds that the Pentecostal's ritual field functions as a "created context" through which Pentecostal liturgy occurs as it manifests Pentecostal's values, the aims of worship practices and spirituality in general. Albercht claims that the Pentecostal's ritual field must be understood as a drama "aimed toward an encounter" and even more interestingly that an "*iconic dynamic*" occurs in Pentecostal worship.<sup>36</sup> This iconic dynamic is an interplay of ritual sounds, ritual sights, and kinesthetic. Fellow believers function as sacred icons. Instead of plastic or wooden images, it is the worshiping community that serves as icons, since "together they represent living, acting, human embodied icons."<sup>37</sup> As they clap, sing, dance, praise and testify a feeling of solidarity arises among the participants creating a special ground for community, influencing the ways in which God is experienced. It is in the Pentecostal community "where learning about God directly and experiencing God perpetually inform and depend upon one another."<sup>38</sup> This dynamic of the Pentecostal worship and liturgy has a two-folded impact: first in the community of believers and second, in the broader community. In the community of believers because Pentecostal worship requires the full participation of every person, and this participation not only takes place in the event, but has the "intention of bestowing a capacity for action"<sup>39</sup> in the general community. As Mary Douglas points out, "the transformative impact of the ritual performance on its participants not only changes the individuals ritualists, it impacts the broader life of the ritual community and the larger society beyond."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> See Ronald L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982), p. 93-95.

<sup>36</sup> Daniel E. Albercht, "Pentecostal Spirituality: Looking through the Lens of Ritual," *Pneuma* 14:2 (Fall 1992), pp. 107-25 (110).

<sup>37</sup> Albercht, "Pentecostal Spirituality," p. 112.

<sup>38</sup> Rick Dale Moore, "A Pentecostal Approach to Scripture," *Seminary Viewpoint* 8:1 (1987), pp. 1, 2.

<sup>39</sup> Cheryl Bridges Johns, *Pentecostal Formation: A Pedagogy among the Oppressed* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), p. 100.

<sup>40</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York and London: Ark Paperbacks, 1966), p. 35.

It is important to understand that being “a Pentecostal” as being “a Catholic” or being “a Protestant” “is a form of being in society.”<sup>41</sup> Since religion is a form of being, being does not commence nor end with the participation of rituals within the “peer community.” On the contrary, it excels this, involving the entire range of relationships the believer has. From this perspective, being a Pentecostal believer means to exist in the tension/balance between exclusion-exclusiveness and inclusiveness-participation. This tension/balance is nurtured by a sense of belonging to both communities (the saved and the unsaved) explicates the ardent desire for evangelizing and the integration of all believers in the congregational life and in the Pentecostal liturgy.

This integration into the congregational life as Petersen notes comes through the believer’s participation in structured activities that gives him or her the opportunity to express themselves, and are challenged to collaborate with their time and resources “stimulating in them the development of communication and organization skills.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, the Pentecostal believer is equipped by his faith community in a contextual and native environment “with the necessary skills to minister at the popular level.”<sup>43</sup> These necessary skills reveal processes of communication/education, which are centered in the community, its target audience, which is popular, and a specific language style, which is suitable to the majority acting as an indicative of the understanding and taste of the majority. Therefore, Pentecostals in Latin America not only embrace and reflect culture, but also reproduces it. In reproducing culture, forms of communication deserve closer attention.

## 8. Pentecostals Bridging with Outsiders: Narrative and Melodrama

How is the Pentecostal message delivered within the context of a collectivist culture? My hypothesis that it occurs through personal narrative.

Narrative has a rich history within the Christian tradition. Scripture itself is full of stories with nearly one-third of the Bible’s books

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<sup>41</sup> Carlos Rodriguez Brandao, “Ser Catolico: Dimensiones Brasileiras: Um Estudo Sobre A Atribucao Da Indetidade A Traves Da Religiao,” *América Indígena* 45:4 (Oct-Dic, 1985), pp. 691-722.

<sup>42</sup> Petersen, *No Con Ejército*, p. 140.

<sup>43</sup> Petersen, *No Con Ejército*, p. 140.

categorized as being primarily historical narratives.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, storytelling is biblical, in addition to being an effective means of communication as well as a means for educating the next generation in the ways of God and the establishment of norms by which to live. M. Goldberg highlighted this power found within stories as “the fact that the most basic Christian convictions had their fundamental source and setting within a framework constituted by biblical narrative.”<sup>45</sup> According to Fisher’s theory, narrative is universal and therefore it is liberating and empowering. It does not limit argumentation to those who have special skill or knowledge, because everyone intuitively knows how to use and evaluate narrative. Thus, narrative is an egalitarian form of discourse and a more holistic one since it incorporates experience. “Narrative appeals to all abilities, including reason, emotion, sensation, imagination, and values.”<sup>46</sup>

As Bastian explains, while historical Protestantism has been a religion of literacy and education, Pentecostalism represents “religions of oral traditions, illiteracy and effervescence.”<sup>47</sup> Although literacy levels in Latin American greatly diverge from one country to another, percentages vary between 95% to 55% of the population.<sup>48</sup> Reinforcing this second orality, are the new ways of perception brought by communications media technology that according to Marshal McLuhan give preponderance to the aural sense, permeates imagination and the affections.<sup>49</sup>

On the other hand, it is possible to link narrative with melodrama. Melodrama was born from “folk tales and fairy tales”<sup>50</sup> which were

<sup>44</sup> B. Wilkinson and K. Boa, *Talk thru the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1983).

<sup>45</sup> M. Goldberg, *Theology and Narrative: A Critical Introduction* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1981), pp. 146-47.

<sup>46</sup> Stephen W. Littlejohn, *Theories of Human Communication* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: Wadsworth, 1999), p. 170.

<sup>47</sup> Jean Pierre Bastian, “The New Religious Map of Latin America: Causes and Social Effects,” *CrossCurrents* Fall 1998 ([www.findarticles.com/cf\\_0/m2096/n3\\_v48/21202867/p1/article.jhtml?term=%22Bastian%22](http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m2096/n3_v48/21202867/p1/article.jhtml?term=%22Bastian%22)) (January 7, 2001).

<sup>48</sup> See statistics provided by Patrick Johnstone, *Operation World: The Day-by-Day Guide to Praying for the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993).

<sup>49</sup> See Marshal McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Message: An Inventory of Effects* (New York: Bantman Books, 1967).

<sup>50</sup> Michael Roemer, *Telling Stories: Postmodernism and the Invalidation of Traditional Narrative* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), p. 271.

constitutional to the culture of orality. As Michael Roemer explains, popular stories have often assumed the form of melodrama, a genre that evolved during the industrial revolution, when large numbers of people moved from rural communities to the city. Since they were illiterate, their tradition could not survive in an urban environment and neither could their oral tradition, they turned to the stage.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, the second hypothesis proposed here, needing further research is that personal narratives or testimonies and melodrama share commonalities that are widely accepted and commonly liked or approved by the community. Fisher revealed the primary motive of narrative when he declared that, “humans are essentially storytellers.”<sup>52</sup>

Laurie Green says that narratives in oral cultures “can unify human groups, celebrate the clan, keep folklore alive and educate in a style interactive with the audience.”<sup>53</sup> In short, stories create cohesiveness and are highly educative. These oral characteristics affect and reflect relationships of such a culture. According to Walter Ong, “persons in a primary oral culture know by a kind of empathetic identification of knower and known.”<sup>54</sup> Moreover, in an oral culture, the oral performer and the live audience interact on occasions of public verbal performance, and this interaction shapes the verbal performance because the performer responds presently to the audience. Therefore, I contend that personal narratives, create an ethos in communion with the Spirit in which the speaker and the audience become one, reinforcing communal participation and testimony as a peculiarity of Pentecostal liturgy. In the light of this, a closer look at testimonies will follow.

## 9. The Role of Testimonies in Early Pentecostals

Although the general idea of testimony is a notion quite well known, it is also true that it is difficult for many to define. Despite these obstacles, all of us have testimonies. Testimonies are part of our lives.

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<sup>51</sup> Roemer, *Telling Stories*, p. 271.

<sup>52</sup> Walter R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), p. 64.

<sup>53</sup> Laurie Green, “Oral Culture and the World of Words,” *Theology* 102 (Sep-Oct, 1999), pp. 328-35 (333).

<sup>54</sup> Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (New York: Routledge, 1971), p. 256.

When persons share their testimonies they always have a story of how God acted. A more theological definition of testimony indicates that it “is a declaration, faith profession or public agreement and fundamentally an evidence given to God’s actions.”<sup>55</sup> In the New Testament testimony involves proclamation with words, works and suffering.

Throughout the last three centuries, testimonies have been the most popular way of communicating to others how one becomes saved. Land explains that “the [Pentecostal] church become a missionary fellowship where testimonies were given constantly in order to develop virtues, expectancy, attitudes and experiences of those testifying.”<sup>56</sup> This dynamic of listening to and giving testimonies in the congregation involved “a praxis of theological reflection.”<sup>57</sup> In these reflections, narrative produced great uniformity and contextual relevance. In addition, Robert McCall points out that “testimonies of individual salvation, sanctification, and baptism with the Holy Ghost became the norm in early Pentecostal worship services.”<sup>58</sup> Testimonies were not a creation of the first Pentecostals, but inherited from the influence of Black spirituality in early Pentecostalism.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, testimonies did not only happen within interracial circles, but also became a vehicle for women’s participation in ministry.<sup>60</sup> As McCall rightly asserts, “the reclaiming of that voice and those roles is a prophetic issue demanding new stories and testimonies for redress.”<sup>61</sup>

#### 10. Relational Culture, Pentecostals and Testimonies

Cuando Cristo vino a mi corazón,  
mi vida entera cambió.

<sup>55</sup> Richard Taylor, J. Kenneth Grider, and Willard H. Taylor, *Diccionario Teológico Beacon* (Kansas City, MO: Casa Nazarena de Publicaciones, 1995), p. 693.

<sup>56</sup> Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>57</sup> Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Duncan McCall, “Storytelling and Testimony: Reclaiming a Pentecostal Distinctive” (D.Min. dissertation, Columbia Theological Seminary, 1998), p. 43.

<sup>59</sup> Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 165.

<sup>60</sup> Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement*, p. 188.

<sup>61</sup> McCall, “Storytelling and Testimony,” p. 45.

Su paz y su amor alejaron de mí,  
 las dudas, las sombras y el temor.  
 Mi vida comenzó cuando el Señor llegó  
 Y hoy puedo cantar yo de su amor  
 Hoy quiero que Cristo te transforme a tí,  
 Que cambie tu vida también,  
 Piensa en la cruz donde murió por tí  
 Y ábrele tu corazón.<sup>62</sup>

Since Jesus came to my heart  
 my whole life changed.  
 His peace and His love have taken away  
 my doubts, shadows and fears.  
 My live began when Jesus came to my heart  
 And now I'm singing about his love.  
 Today I want Him to transform you  
 That He may change your life as well  
 Just think in the cross where for you Jesus died  
 And open your heart to him.<sup>63</sup>

Latin American Pentecostals know about the transformation power in telling stories about what the living God has done and will do. Telling these stories involves the experiential and relational nature of narrative.<sup>64</sup> As a collectivist culture Latin Americans highly value relationships, and when a culture holds relationships as crucial, relationships are also hold the key to communication. In this context, the constitution and objective of communication “is not merely to pass on truth, but to establish, maintain, and enjoy the fruits of relationships.”<sup>65</sup> Members of a collectivist culture develop into the relational foundations and implications of the message. “Truth or reality is not their starting point. The relational speaker is not chiefly concerned about reality. His goal is relationships.”<sup>66</sup> Therefore, the western paradigm of communication of

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<sup>62</sup> A popular song throughout Latin American Protestant churches including those of the Pentecostal faith.

<sup>63</sup> Translation is mine

<sup>64</sup> Michael B. Dowd, “Contours of a Narrative Pentecostal Theology and Practice” (a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Gaithersburg, MD, Nov 1985), p. 7.

<sup>65</sup> Gary Sheer, “How to Communicate in a Relational Culture,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 31 (October 1995), pp. 470-74 (471).

<sup>66</sup> Sheer, “How to Communicate,” p. 471.



the gospel centered on reason and spotless speech falls short in a collectivist culture. This is why personal narratives are an effective way of presenting the message of salvation and hope. When surrounded by chaos, misery, sickness and hopelessness, stories of salvation, healing, hope, and victory, are powerful and compelling stories that open the path for living the life in expectation of the miraculous, that is of "what God will do for me, because I heard, you told us, what he has done for you."

### 11. Using Testimonies in a Technological Culture

Technology is a gift from God. Technology has the amazing capacity to make the invisible visible, and to magnify small treasures as personal stories that can function like mustard seeds. The first Pentecostals in Latin America used to demonize the media, they did not go to the cinema nor watch television: "it was sinful." Now, sometimes two televisions can be found in our homes, and we do go to the cinema. Still, it is important to remember that Pentecostals hold a tradition of holiness. In pursuing such holiness, in tension/balance with both communities (the saved and unsaved) Pentecostals have the challenge of enjoying media programming and employ them redemptively. This demands effort and discipline, as Franklin says, "this work must occur both, within our own psyches as well as in the public arena"<sup>67</sup> that is, we must engage in self-criticism and media criticism. Using redemptively the media also demands Pentecostals to oppose programming that goes against Christian values in order to grant narrative of divine action in the world an opportunity. In other words, Latin American Pentecostals must learn to be creative and critics. These times require Pentecostals "not feed only on the junk food of excess, scandal, and superficiality which is so easily found in the current world of televangelism"<sup>68</sup> but to do more. Ana Langerak boldly notes:

With the increased visibility of Pentecostals and other Christians in the media, public spaces, entertainment and politics; with "God-talk" having become fashionable among intellectuals and in the middle class; with political figures, non-governmental organizations and corporations

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<sup>67</sup> Robert M. Franklin, "The Church and Mass Media Communication in the Twenty-First Century," *International Review of Mission* 78 (1998), pp. 410-16.

<sup>68</sup> Franklin, "The Church and Mass Media Communication," pp. 410-16.

utilizing the language of salvation, such “God-talk” becomes confusing and thus meaningless.<sup>69</sup>

Therefore the question to address is in what ways is the “God-talk” of Pentecostals and other believers different in conveying life, hope and love? As Pentecostals, our “talks” ought to be rooted in a spirituality of experience that will also be authentic in service, sacrifice and struggle.

## 12. Conclusions

Throughout this presentation it has been confirmed that the good news of the gospel has been spread through Latin America in an oral fashion finding its principal resource in the personal narrative. This narrative was nurtured by the *apocalyptic telos*, to borrow Land’s expression, that pulled those testifying as they narrated providential events, including healing, daily victories, and progress towards sanctification. As a result, everyone listened, identified and responded actively, merging their narratives with the meta-narrative. The relational character of Latin American culture was a perfect fit for Pentecostal worship and liturgy in which, personal narratives played a central role, as they recapitulated God’s saving action. The subjective culture or “self-construals,” by which our behaviors towards others are influenced and dictated, offered a fertile soil for the growth of Latin American Pentecostalism, linking both worlds.

As we face the twenty-first century, technological advances affect cultural patterns. Therefore, storytelling and testimonies may be threatened if we overlook their importance in shaping an ethos in which faith, commitment, and walking with God is learned in a context of community and continuity. Paradoxically it is technology what can also make a great contribution to our narratives. The great challenge faced is to find creative ways in which we can present our testimonies, by using all media resources available, as well as understanding how can we use them effectively, in excellence. The challenge is also one of encouraging the younger generation to tell their stories finding ways others than verbalizing. We must be reminded that these are times dominated by the eye and the ear, and if appealing to these senses that testimonies can be used so pass the message on salvation and hope. Another challenge is the

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<sup>69</sup> Ana Langerak, “The Witness and the Influence of Pentecostal Christians in Latin America,” *International Review of Mission* 87 (1999), pp. 175-87 (187).

ethical use of the testimonies. Testimonies are not meant to foster a model of “come and see” but the incarnational narrative of Emmanuel, “God with us.” Perhaps our great challenge will be to keep nurturing and encouraging the use of testimonies and within the community of believers. The explosion of growth in Latin American Pentecostalism has led to the mega church reality. Therefore, anonymity and lack of strong relationships may affect the construction of a solid communal identity, which is brought, in part, by the sharing of testimonies.

If in certain contexts storytelling is an art that is becoming more and more unusual,<sup>70</sup> and, if according to Fisher, “humans are essentially storytellers,”<sup>71</sup> it is urgent to reconsider how the stories are being told. Orality can much benefit with advances in technology, therefore, the need for quality content becomes more critical than ever, but content needs the context of community of faith.

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<sup>70</sup> McCall, “Storytelling and Testimony,” p. 139.

<sup>71</sup> Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*, p. 64.