

# Evangelical Review of Theology

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 34 · Number 4 · October 2010

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical  
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



for  
WORLD EVANGELICAL  
ALLIANCE  
Theological Commission

# Dilemmas in the Evangelical Movement and its Theology. Argentinean Perspective<sup>1</sup>

David A. Roldán

**KEYWORDS:** *Neo-Pentecostalism, Pentecostalism, Liberation Theology, Prosperity Theology, mega-church, socialism, integral mission*

SOME HISTORIANS date the Protestant presence in Argentina to four hundred years ago.<sup>2</sup> But what happened then were really timid initiatives; the real beginning of Protestantism (in its 'immigration' and 'mission' models)<sup>3</sup> occurred in the 19th century. So, the Protestant and evangelical movement in Argentina is still relatively young.<sup>4</sup>

There are several churches that can be identified with the evangelical movement, including the Baptists (from the south of the US), Plymouth Brethren ('Hermanos Libres'), Christian & Missionary Alliance, Mennonites, Presbyterians, the Evangelical Union of Argentina, the Church of the Nazarene and the Congregationalists. The remainder of Argentinean Protestantism (and similarly in other countries of Hispanic language) include the 'historical churches' rooted in the Reformation, such as the Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterian and others.

These 'historical churches' which were not related to 'mission Protestantism' at the beginning of its presence in our context, slowly started to offer Sunday worship services in Spanish. They displayed a kind of 'elitism' related to their European origins which represented an obstacle to the development of an 'incarnational ecclesiology'. This type of church faces the bigger obstacle, viz., the risk of disappearance. Generally, in Argentina

most of the intellectual elite (and pastors) were absorbed by Liberation Theology and its predecessor movement, known as Iglesia y Sociedad en América Latina (Church and Society in Latin America, ISAL); it had Protestant roots and was associated with names like Richard Shaull, Julio de Santa Ana, José Míguez Bonino and Emilio Castro (so to speak, an Ecumenical Protestantism).<sup>5</sup>

All of the above mentioned churches including the Pentecostals are called 'evangelicals' in Argentina. This means that for Hispanic Latin America, the word 'evangelical' is quite inclusive.

As noted above, the main obstacle that 'historic Protestantism' has to confront is the risk of disappearance. Generally speaking, even the 'organic' growth of these churches is in crisis (i.e. growth through the birth of children). Furthermore, its polarization with the Pentecostal world is so critical that several 'historical Protestants' consider themselves to be more closely related to Catholics than to Pentecostals or even 'evangelical' movements, which to some extent is true.

The great challenge to the evangelical movement, strictly speaking, is represented by classical Pentecostalism, and even more, by Neo-Pente-

costalism. By Neo-Pentecostalism I mean the new forms of being 'charismatic' from the 1980s on to the present, including Prosperity Theology; the increasing growth in the size of the churches (very big churches or 'mega churches'); the strongly centralised authority of each 'mega church' in a single pastor or Apostle; the use of manipulative techniques in the religious services; emphasis on the doctrine of sanctification and the search for a true life in the Spirit; the focus on 'spiritual warfare' and the attacks by Satan on Christians. For me, the distinctive feature of Neo-Pentecostalism in contrast with 'classical Pentecostalism', is that it is a mass movement and it has such a wide presence across the whole country and in all social classes.

In Buenos Aires, we have three associations of Churches: Pentecostal, historical Protestantism (with some exceptions), and evangelical. Even though it is the oldest grouping, the historical churches have lost their hegemony; the Pentecostals have a minimum of social presence, but the evangelicals are bigger and more socially visible.

But even in this scene the evangelical perspective has to overcome a challenge—the 'pentecostalization' of its identity. This is a process that seems to be irreversible; we do not have to understand this, *prima facie*, as a betrayal or something to worry about or to regret. But this is a fact and at the heart of many of the evangelical churches.

Here I want to focus on a dilemma faced by the evangelical movement, viz., how to conduct a dialogue with Neo-Pentecostalism, what to learn from it, what to criticize in it, and what

<sup>1</sup> This is a small participation given at *Brazil Consultation of the TC-WEA* (Sao Paulo, July 2009). So, this explains its oral form.

<sup>2</sup> Arnoldo Canclini, *400 años de Protestantismo argentino* (Buenos Aires: FIET, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Waldo Villalpando, *Las iglesias del trasplante: Protestantismo de inmigración en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Centro de Estudios Cristianos, 1970).

<sup>4</sup> See José Míguez Bonino, *Rostros del Protestantismo Latinoamericano* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Creación—ISEDET, 1995).

**David A. Roldán** is Dean and Professor of Philosophy, Ethics and Hermeneutics at Instituto Teológico (FIET) in Buenos Aires, Argentina FIET. He also researches 19th century philosophy at Universidad de Buenos Aires while reading for his PhD. He is Editor of *Teología y Cultura*, ([www.teologos.com.ar](http://www.teologos.com.ar)). This is an edited version of a paper delivered at the WEA Theological Commission Consultation on 'Evangelical Theology and the Evangelical Movement in Latin America' held 24-25 July 2009 in São Paulo, Brasil.

<sup>5</sup> For some of ISAL's theoretical products, see, for example: José Míguez Bonino, *Christians and Marxists* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1976); José Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); Richard Shaull, *El cristianismo y la revolución social* (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 1955).

to assimilate.<sup>6</sup> I will summarize this by saying that the authority of the Bible (and its communitarian reading) seems to be de-centered in the Neo-Pentecostal model. This, I think, is related to several features:

- a. The strong role of its central leadership.
- b. 'Mega Churches' that equate the criterion of truth with the size of membership.
- c. The loss of the study of the Bible by the congregation (even in the classical form of the Sunday School).
- d. A hierarchical system of power and administration: God speaks to the pastor, the pastor speaks to the leaders, the leaders speak to the people.
- e. This results in a servile state of mind and a loss of autonomy and critical thought.
- f. Beside this, in the Neo-Pentecostal movement, especially in the mega-churches, there is a clear tendency not to recognize other Christians, even evangelicals as valid believers or churches, making them almost like a sect. Generally speaking,

the mega-churches are a denomination by themselves, but without the safeguards of an adequate institutional organization (for example, regulations and statutes, periodical changes of roles, democratic representation and administration of power, etc.).

- g. As an example (probably an exception, but also as a warning), some pastors say in their preaching that the Bible is the word of God from 'the past', but they have 'the fresh... word of God for today, given by the Holy Ghost'.
- h. In other cases, the gospel is offered as a 'product', as a version of Bonhoeffer's God as a 'patch to cover the holes'.
- i. The gospel is offered also as an 'alternative therapy' (for example, some female pastors guide their sisters in Christ to pray to God for a beautiful body shape!).
- j. Other brothers completely ignore other expressions of Christian faith, considering their own churches as the only authentic church of Christ. To use an expression from German Idealism, we could say that they have little 'evangelical self-consciousness'.

From Neo-Pentecostalism, the evangelical movement must learn better organizational skills (how to develop big projects and events), the charismatic fervour (that was present, of course, in classic Pentecostalism) and a high level of individual commitment. Of course, learning these new attitudes must be carried out critically, taking care to avoid, for example, the

<sup>6</sup> Some sociological approaches are: Pablo Semán, 'Los filtros populares en la recepción de la Teología de la Prosperidad', in *XXII Reunión Anual de ANPOCS* (Caxambu: Mimeo, 1998); Hilario Wynarczyk et al., 'Héctor Aníbal Giménez y Carlos Annacondia', in *Nuevos movimientos religiosos y ciencias sociales* (Buenos Aires: CEAL, 1993), 49-96; Alejandro Frigerio, ed., *El Pentecostalismo en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: CEAL, 1994); Daniel Míguez, 'To help you Find God': *The making of a Pentecostal identity in a Buenos Aires suburb* (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 1997).

problem of manipulation. In other words, we cannot use just any method in order to enlarge our churches, or maintain the high commitment of our fellow members of the community.

I would like to make some comments to complement these observations at a higher level. I consider that we cannot isolate this regression in the quality of the religious life in the evangelical field (the increasing use of manipulation, for example), from another phenomenon in the entire Argentinean society (or even in the global western culture). The decade of the 1960s was a high point in social struggle and self-consciousness with concerns for freedom, human rights, and autonomy. It was also a time when higher cultural levels were reached. For example, in the area of literature, we had the 'Latin American boom', with writers and poets like Julio Cortázar, Octavio Paz, Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosas and Carlos Fuentes. While Argentinean society was enjoying this higher level, we had the same phenomenon in the churches, with a highly cultured membership. It was a time of critical thinking. Corruption and manipulation existed, of course, but in a lesser way.

But secular society itself then experienced a decline in its critical skills, its social mobilization and the struggle for emancipation of women and other social minorities. This process was intensified in the 1980s. In the same way, I think, a 'mass movement' took place in the evangelical and Pentecostal areas, resulting in a loss of any sense of institutional authority over the pastors or 'apostles' and the development of extremely polarised thinking about good and evil, sin and sancti-

fication and other matters; there was also the emergence of the role of the pastor as a 'chieftain'.<sup>7</sup>

The disappearance of 'Real Socialism', the so-called 'death of ideologies'—in other words, 'economic globalization' and 'postmodern culture'—had an impact on the evangelical movement too. This was manifested in part in the Neo-Pentecostal mega-churches. In philosophical terms, probably we could translate this as some kind of abstract neo-romanticism or a (bad) kierkegaardianism.<sup>8</sup> This created an individualistic Christianity, which was non-historicist and without an eschatological Messianism or the *kerygma* of the Kingdom of God. But authentic Christianity cannot offer 'easy solutions' and 'easy responses' and does not promise a 'triumphalistic end of our suffering', or a miraculous intervention of God in everyday life.

As the Belgian historian Jean-Pierre Bastian explains: at the beginning of Protestantism in Latin America in the early 20th century, the new movement represented an avant-garde approach to democratic practices (assemblies, records, periodical renewal of authorities, submission of the executive secretary to a board, etc.); however, by the end of the same century there is the ironic situation that outside of the

<sup>7</sup> See 'charismatic leadership', in Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1978).

<sup>8</sup> For a conceptualization of some kind of 'kierkegaardianism' and the evangelical identity, see Harvey Cox, *La religión en la ciudad secular. Hacia una teología posmoderna*, trans. Jesús García Abril (Santander: Sal Terrae [orig. 1984], 1985), 225.

churches there is much more freedom and democracy than within.<sup>9</sup>

To conclude this approach, I would say that the Neo-Pentecostal movement has received great responsibility together with this great power in their hands. The question is whether they (primarily the leaders, pastors or apostles) will pass 'the test of power'.

In terms of its own self-consciousness, the evangelical movement should carefully consider in what aspects the Neo-Pentecostal movement is an example to follow and what aspects should be avoided. The symbolic (and political?) pressure is so great that the phenomenon should not be ignored. Let me summarize some criteria that could be useful in this task:

- a. The centrality and authority of the Holy Scripture over all kind of leaders or 'spiritual chieftains', and the communitarian reading of Scripture.
- b. The personal experience of conversion and the fullness of the Holy Spirit are experiences that must be integrated within the community of believers that seeks to renew these experiences.
- c. The development of a sense of personal responsibility, with freedom and critical thinking, and the preaching of a prophetic *kerygma* for the society.
- d. A commitment to 'Integral Mission', which is a great legacy of

the Latin American Theological Fraternity.

- e. A Trinitarian view that, for today in our context, means to revisit the Father as the creator of heaven and earth, and his interest in a reality far beyond the 'four walls of our churches'.
- f. The structuring and organising of institutions and processes that have previously developed in an ad-hoc and independent, autonomous manner; for example, the formal education of our leadership, the process of mutual learning, etc.
- g. An examination of non-formal learning—for example, public evangelical discourse, mass media, evangelical journalism, etc.
- h. Monitoring (and reduction) of manipulation; the fact that Christ wants 'slaves' (*doulos*) does not mean that we should be slaves of our pastors—probably we need to revisit the metaphor of becoming 'friends of Jesus'.

In the strictly theological dimension, the evangelical movement is at present clearly without any focus or serious activity. The exception is the Latin American Theological Fraternity (FTL), which is, without doubt, the major movement of *Evangelical* Latin American theologians. But even this group of theologians is idle in the production of theological thinking; in the Spanish language it has a diminishing presence in the publication of new concepts, although fortunately, in Brazil, they are still publishing the classic *Boletín Teológico* that was discontinued several years ago in Spanish.

We can see some clear trends

towards reductionism in this movement: the reduction of theology to missiology, and from missiology to a non-political action—so to speak; the FTL always had to think of itself in relation to 'political' Latin American Liberation Theology.<sup>10</sup>

In this sense, the evangelical movement must think deeply about the process of secularization. It is true that for the people of Israel it was necessary that the same religious leaders were in charge of religious activities as well as national social and political activities. But we can see, in this juxtaposition, the abuse of the priestly caste, with no democratic dynamics. In the process of secularization, which began in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, the scene was significantly changed. So the question is whether we can still consider the churches as the *main* bodies responsible for 'social justice' in the world.

It is clear that we as evangelicals have an 'integral mission', but beyond this 'evangelical self-consciousness' (of an integral gospel), and ministry to care for the needy in society, what is our role in reclaiming 'social justice' in

relation to our governments? Are not those governments themselves the main agents who must take responsibility for these matters? If so, we probably have to make a distinction between a prophetic role in reclaiming social justice on the one hand, and creating theological foundations for this process on the other. At the same time, we must continue to share the full gospel of God and show God's care for the poor and weak.

If we focus our theological reflection in a way that takes secularization seriously,<sup>11</sup> claims for human rights, and the value of the law (still very weak in our context), we can see our mission more clearly: to preach the gospel of God and repentance from sins. Looking at the strictly theological field, as evangelical Hispanic speakers of Latin America, we have a very great responsibility. If I am not wrong, we do not have even one 'systematic theology' developed in our context by an evangelical Hispanic speaking author (with relatively high status). What come closest to this are the *Teología Abierta*, of Juan Luis Segundo, and *Liberation Theology*, of Gustavo Gutiérrez, but both of these are Catholics.

To some extent, the classical evangelical movement which we expected

<sup>10</sup> Some classical books are: Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teología de la Liberación: perspectivas*, 15th ed. (Salamanca: Sígueme [orig. 1971], 1994); Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberación de la teología* (Buenos Aires: Carlos Lohlé, 1975); Juan Luis Segundo, *Teología abierta para el laico adulto*, 5 vols. (Buenos Aires: Carlos Lohlé, 1968); José Porfirio Miranda, *El ser y el Mesías* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1973); Enrique Dussel, *Para una ética de la Liberación Latinoamericana*, 5 vols. (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 1973); Leonardo Boff, *Igreja: carisma e poder. Ensaio de Ecclesiologia militante* (San Pablo: Editora Ática, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985); *El discurso filosófico de la modernidad*, trans. Manuel Jiménez Redondo (Buenos Aires: Katz Editores [orig. 1985], 2008); Harvey Cox, *The Secular City. Secularization and Urbanization in a Theological Perspective* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965); Hans Blumenberg, *La legitimación de la Edad Moderna* (Valencia: Pre-textos, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Jean Pierre Bastian, *Historia del protestantismo en América Latina*, 2<sup>a</sup> ed. (México: Ediciones CUPSA, 1990); Jean Pierre Bastian, *La Mutación Religiosa en América Latina* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1997).

to fill this need (the Latin American Theological Fraternity) passed over this task, with its reduction of theology to missiology. Some Latin American theologians must say, 'Excuse me, I want to do "theoretical theology"' or 'I'm interested in *academia*'. But in saying this, we have to be aware that this is not a 'privative' issue of Latin American theology, or theology itself in our time. Other theoretical fields are suffering parallel movements in the legacy of North-American Pragmatism:<sup>12</sup> the legacy of Existentialism,<sup>13</sup> the postmodernist<sup>14</sup> mood, post-struct-

turalism,<sup>15</sup> and even some kind of Marxism.<sup>16</sup> In all these manifestations we can find 'anti-theoretical' forces.

The idea of 'notion' (*Begriff* in Hegelian philosophy), is not a 'dead thought' or merely ideal reality that can be confronted with material reality: 'notion' is really living and has its own activity in history and reality. This approach seems to be obsolete, and today the 'important things' have nothing to do with 'thought': instead the focus is on action or praxis. Now I may be an 'idealist' or retrogressive, but I consider that thought does really matter; as a Christian evangelical, and a 'friend of Jesus Christ', theology is vitally important to me and has value in itself. So I am pleased to be a member of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance.

12 Related to names like Charles Peirce, William James, and recently, Richard Rorty.

13 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique (précédé de Question de méthode). Tome I Théorie des ensembles pratiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960); Jean-Paul Sartre, *El existencialismo es un humanismo* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones del 80, 1992); Jean-Paul Sartre, *Le Être et le Neant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943); *El ser y la nada*, trans. Juan Valmar (Buenos Aires: Losada, 2004); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'El marxismo occidental', in *Las aventuras de la dialéctica*, trans. León Rozitchner (Buenos Aires: La Pléyade, 1974), 37-69; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Existencialismo y marxismo*, trans. Bernardo Guillén (Buenos Aires: Deucalión, 1954).

14 Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition post-moderne: rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Minuit 1979); Marshall Berman, 'Brindis por la modernidad', in *El debate modernidad posmodernidad: edición ampliada y actualizada*, ed. Nicolás Casullo (Buenos Aires: Retórica Ediciones, 2004), 87-105.

15 Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les Choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966); Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la Différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967).

16 Against this, see Alain Badiou, *Manifeste pour la philosophie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1989); trans. *Manifesto por la filosofía*, trans. Victoriano Alcantud Serrano (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión [orig. 1989], 2007); Alain Badiou, *San Pablo. La fundación del universalismo* (Madrid: Anthropos, 1999); Hannah Arendt, *The life of Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978); trans. *La vida del espíritu*, trans. Carmen Corral y Fina Birulés (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2002).

# The In-Roads of Evangelical Theology and the Evangelical Movement in Latin American Spanish-Speaking Countries

J. Daniel Salinas

**KEYWORDS:** *Latin American church, Pentecostalism, Latin American evangelical theology.*

I HAD THE PRIVILEGE of being born in an evangelical home. My father became an evangelical in his mid-twenties. He is now eighty-one, so he has been an evangelical for over half a century. Let me tell you what he has seen in his lifetime in the evangelical church. My father's conversion took place while he worked as a truck driver. A mechanic in his company shared the evangelical faith with him and then through Bible reading and conversations with other evangelicals, the Lord changed his heart.

At that time the evangelical church in Colombia was quite small (0.34%)<sup>1</sup>

and depended heavily on foreign missionaries. During the mid 1950s, Colombia, my native land, was recovering from a period of extreme political violence that turned into a religious persecution by Catholic priests. Evangelicals were expelled from their farmlands and forced to flee to the cities without any recourse to reclaim their properties. My mother's side of the family had this experience, losing all their farming land and having to flee to the city. Furthermore, there was an official propaganda campaign where the military government accused evangelicals of having an alliance with communism in order to destroy national unity.<sup>2</sup>

2 William Beltrán, 'El Evangelicalismo y el Movimiento Pentecostal en Colombia en el Siglo XX,' in *Historia del Cristianismo en Colombia: Corrientes y Diversidad*, ed. Ana María Bidegán, 451-480, (Bogotá: Taurus, 2004), 462.

1 P. S. J. Damboriena, *El Protestantismo en América Latina: La Situación del Protestantismo en los países latino-americanos* (Friburg, Switzerland: FERES, 1963), Vol.2, 25.

*J. Daniel Salinas*, MA, PhD, a native of Colombia, serves as the General Secretary of Grupo Bíblico Universitario de Paraguay (GBUP), a member group of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES), in Asunción, Paraguay. This is an edited version of a paper delivered at the WEA Theological Commission Consultation on 'Evangelical Theology and the Evangelical Movement in Latin America' held 24-25 July 2009 in São Paulo, Brasil.