The Azusa Street Mission and Latin American Pentecostalism

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In less than a century, the Pentecostal movement has evolved from a small, ragtag band of Christian believers at the Azusa Street Mission to a worldwide movement with an estimated 500 million adherents. In few places has the growth been faster than in Latin America. Although the early participants in the movement were on the margins of society—“the loose dust of the earth for the wind to blow away,” as described not long ago by one Latin American theologian—the rippling waves of the Pentecostal experience have flowed into almost every sector of religious and secular society.

The exponential growth of Latin American Pentecostalism has typically been among the most disadvantaged or dissatisfied sectors, such as the peasantry, the urban poor, women, Indians and ethnic minorities, young adults, and the independent middle-class groups. These Pentecostal groups have in the aggregate organized the most extensive network of popularly directed associations outside the Roman Catholic Church and, in the process, have become a recognized religious alternative throughout Central and South America.

The Azusa Street revival became the locus for the Pentecostal movement that mushroomed throughout Latin America and around the globe. New Testament principles of spiritual empowerment, coupled with the experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, themes developed during the formative years at the Azusa Street Mission, provided the essential theological pattern.

Contributions to Latin American Pentecostalism

The Azusa Street revival added fuel to the substantial fire of the revival movement already making its appearance throughout the world. Widespread circulation of literature coming from the pens of Pentecostal editors quickly carried the message overseas. Hundreds of potentially influential leaders from around the globe traveled to Azusa Street or one of the other urban centers, experienced Spirit baptism for themselves, and then returned to their country of origin to contextualize the Pentecostal message within their own cultural matrix. The emergence of Latin American Pentecostalism was, in large part, a fruit of these highly fluid and decentralized Azusa Street networks. The impact of the Azusa Street experience on the eruption of Latin American Pentecostalism was catalytic, providing models through which Latin American Pentecostals took the initiative in adapting the message to their own situations.

Although the rapid spread of Pentecostalism in Latin America occurred after World War II, the movement was established much earlier, primarily in Brazil and Chile before 1910 and in Central America during the following decade. Italian Luigi Francescon, filled with the Spirit during a visit to the Azusa Street Mission, carried the Pentecostal message to the south of Brazil and Argentina. Swedes Daniel Berg and Gunnar Vringen, who introduced Pentecostalism to the northern states of Brazil, were brought into Pentecost through the Chicago center, an offspring of Azusa Street, as were other Scandinavians, whose influence reached Willis Hoover, founder of the movement in Chile in 1909. Indeed, several Latin American Pentecostal groups predate the formation of the largest North American Pentecostal churches.

From the beginning, Hispanics were part of the new revival movement at Azusa Street. Through their natural networks, Latino preachers transmitted the Pentecostal message to countries in Latin America. Pentecostal churches in the communities straddling the United States–Mexican border arose almost simultaneously alongside their North American counterparts, often the two developing as a single movement.1 Pioneering evangelists like Francisco Olazábal and Juan Lugo, after experiencing Spirit baptism, introduced the Pentecostal message to Hispanics in the United States and Puerto Rico, with extraordinary results.2

In addition to Latinos who were proclaiming the Pentecostal story, the churches represented at Azusa Street quickly organized themselves into scores of fellowships and almost immediately commissioned missionaries for global service. The Assemblies of God, for example, traces its Hispanic origins in the United States and along the border regions of northern Mexico to the churches established by missionary pioneer Henry C. Ball, beginning in 1915.3 Not a few early Pentecostal missionaries were initially sent out by other mission boards, but when the winds of supernatural happenings that took place at the Azusa Street Mission reached them, these missionaries also received Spirit baptism.

If the Pentecostal experience was perceived negatively by their sending agency, it was not unusual for a missionary to resign—sometimes willingly, sometimes not—from the respective mission with hopes of affiliating with one of the newly formed Pentecostal groups. Such was the case of Alice Eveline Luce, the daughter of an Anglican vicar and under missionary appointment to India with the Anglican-sponsored Church Mission Society. Luce, prompted by the testimonies she had heard from the Azusa Street revival, sought and experienced the baptism of the Spirit while serving in India in 1910. Four years later, at age forty-two, she decided to resign from her post with CMS, and soon she joined the Assemblies of God. Luce became one of the chief architects of the Hispanic Pentecostal movement in the southwestern United States and in Mexico, her career spanning another forty years of ministry.4

By whatever channel the message of the Azusa Street Mission reached Latin America, Pentecostalism quickly became reproducible and was easily networked throughout the continent. In the popular religious market, where groups vied for prospective members and support for their particular brand of belief or form of association, Latin American Pentecostals, simi-
lar to the men and women from the Azusa Street revival, demonstrated unusual capacity to create ingenious mechanisms for extending their influence.

**Latinization of the Azusa Street Experience**

Reminiscent of their forebears from Azusa Street, Latin American Pentecostals, despite immense diversity, have at the core a supernatural worldview perspective that is codified through religious symbols and practices such as glossolalia and healings, supernatural interventions, participative worship, and expression in music. They approach the world with a “preunderstanding” that they are participants in God’s unfolding drama. The biblical narratives of sorrow and pain, or of power and praise, are interpreted theologically into the concrete realities of their daily spiritual, social, or physical contexts. Their interaction with society is sharpened by a personal sense that, despite the circumstances, the Holy Spirit has been bestowed upon them as an “enduement of power.” They are God’s instruments, even if their contextual reality may systematically deny them access to basic human rights, marginalize them to huge slums and shantytowns, or refuse them access to political and social opportunity. For Latin American Pentecostals, supernatural power is not an abstract or symbolic promise, but rather is demonstrable through an experiential spirituality characterized by its practicality. Latin American Pentecostals, whose testimonies parallel the accounts in the Acts of the Apostles, offer to millions an experience that is dynamically equivalent to that of the pioneers of the Azusa Street revival.

**A Fulfillment of the Azusa Street Vision**

Contrary to the dismissal of observers who consider Pentecostalism in Latin America as primarily a retrograde reaction to despair, confidence unleashed by Pentecostal emphases generates a feeling of worth and power, offering adherents extraordinary purpose in facing the future. These national networks of largely autonomous local congregations are not merely at the margins of a Latin American clamor for a more rewarding and secure future. They are also beginning to demonstrate their potential for mobilizing large numbers of people to create institutional structures capable of performing various educational, community development, social service, and political functions. If early Pentecostals at Azusa Street claimed that their essential mission was to restore to the church the energy of the primitive Christian faith, Latin American Pentecostals have unleashed that energy and taken their movement from marginality into the mainstream within three generations.

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