

THE GROWTH OF EVANGELICALISM IN CENTRAL AMERICA: POLITICAL AND
SECURITY PERSPECTIVES

BY

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SUMMARY

The monograph will examine political and security perspectives of the growth of evangelicalism in Central America. The paper will investigate Central American evangelicals, their increasing numbers, and their growing political institutionalization and influence. It will explore evangelical doctrine and societal concepts, evangelical-Roman Catholic rivalry, and similarities between the evangelical political experiences in the United States and Central America. Finally, keeping in mind the purposes of the Inter-American Defense College, the monograph will investigate and draw conclusions concerning the impact of evangelical political influence on regional security.

Investigation revealed evangelical Protestantism is growing rapidly in Central America. This is a departure from 500 years of near monopoly by the Roman Catholic Church. Along with their numerical growth, evangelicals have increased their political institutionalization and influence in the politics of the region. This political influence has had a positive effect on democratic stability, free market economic reform, and civilianization of Central American governments. In turn, this trend toward political stability, economic reform, and civilianization has had a marked positive effect on regional security.

CERTIFICATION OF ADVISOR

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EXPLANATORY NOTE

The opinions expressed in this monograph are the exclusive responsibility of the author and do not represent the position of the Inter-American Defense College.

AUTHORIZATION FOR PUBLICATION

I authorize the Inter-American Defense College to publish this monograph as a Selected Reading or in the Journal of the College.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Evangelical Politics in Managua and Topeka

Two obscure news stories appeared in North American media during the autumn of 1996. Both dealt with election news in the seemingly unrelated locations of Nicaragua and Kansas. Depending on one's viewpoint, both items dealt with an encouraging development or gloomy trend: the growing influence of evangelical Protestantism on the politics of the United States and Central America.

The media widely reported the October Nicaraguan presidential election victory of Managua mayor Arnoldo Aleman and his Liberal Alliance party over the opposition Sandinistas led by former president Daniel Ortega. Aleman won a very comfortable 49% to 39% victory in an election observed by representatives of international organizations. Fully 83% of the eligible Nicaraguan electorate voted and officials later set aside Sandinista claims of election fraud.

Nicaragua's Roman Catholic Cardinal Miguel Ovando y Bravo, a long time Sandinista critic who continued a long tradition of Roman Catholic church involvement in Central American politics, supported Aleman's presidential bid. Ovando y Bravo saw the Liberal Alliance victory as a solution to Nicaragua's status as the second poorest nation (after Haiti) in the Western Hemisphere.

However, according to syndicated columnist Georgi Anne Geyser, a footnote to the history of the 1996 Nicaraguan elections surprised many observers:

This is the fact that a new political grouping and factor, the *Camino Cristiano Nicaraguense* (Nicaraguan Christian Way) came in number three in the votes, behind Mr. Aleman and Mr. Ortega and the Sandinista Party--tellingly, it also came in ahead of the traditional Conservative Party, which ruled Nicaragua for so many years.

This party is the party of the growing evangelical movement in Nicaragua, a movement that is also growing all over the region in conflict with both the Marxists and the Roman Catholics. Its candidate, Guillermo Osorno, only received four percent of the vote, but that is a quite extraordinary feat under these circumstances.

Ironically, these Protestant evangelicals were aided and abetted by the Sandinistas during their 11 years in power as a counterweight to the powerful Catholic Church; but

Nicaragua has always held political lesson in check for those who thought they were in control in this complicated and tormented little country that may now, nevertheless, have a chance.¹

Three thousand miles from Managua in the flat farmlands surrounding Topeka, Kansas, two candidates vied for the House seat of Kansas' Second Congressional District. They were Republican Jim Ryun, a hometown hero who once held the world record in the mile run, and Democrat John Frieden.

The race for the House seat, vacated by Republican Representative Sam Brownback who ran successfully for the US Senate, gained some attention due to its vulnerability for the Republicans. The Democrats hoped to win the seat in their bid to regain the majority in the House of Representatives. Many observers predicted a Frieden victory.

Ryun, a political neophyte, had long been involved in evangelical Protestant ministries, youth sports camps, and motivational speaking. Although he conducted his campaign largely on traditional conservative Republican issues such as lowering taxes and reducing government spending, voters were well aware of his connections with the Christian Coalition and other conservative evangelical groups. Ryun took conservative positions on controversial social issues such as abortion, homosexuality, and school choice.

Behind in opinion polls late in the campaign, candidate Frieden decided to attack Ryun's conservative religious background. He strongly criticized the Republican for a 1995 nonpolitical magazine article published in a widely circulated evangelical Christian magazine.

In the article, Ryun expressed what Frieden described as extremist views on dating and marriage. Ryun wrote of his very traditional beliefs on elimination of dating before marriage. The self-described "born again" Christian advocated its replacement by a courtship in which young men underwent careful screening by the girl's parents to determine personal suitability,

¹ Georgie Anne Geyer, "Hope Out of Torment, *Washington Times*, 23 October 1996, A14.

financial resources and spiritual maturity. “The young man must be spiritually and financially prepared to marry (the woman) if they fall in love,” stated Ryun.²

In a US society in which very young teenagers often date extensively, Ryun’s views were certainly outside the American cultural mainstream. However, in an election year in which candidates of all stripes contended mightily for the high ground on “family values” issues, Frieden’s criticism of the article backfired. Far from having a negative impact, the flap over Ryun’s courtship views seemed to endear him to the voters. He won the race comfortably with 53% of the vote.³

Ryun’s victory repeated a trend that resulted in the Republicans retaining their majorities in both the Senate and House. Ralph Reed, executive director of the Christian Coalition, unabashedly claimed that his organization “increased our pro-family majority in the Senate and held on to a pro-family majority in the House of Representatives...an achievement made possible by a record turnout of Christian voters.”⁴

Examining the Evangelical Growth and Political Influence

Both of these election accounts are small parts of a much larger and potentially epoch change on the political scenes of both Central America and the United States. This paper will use the United States evangelical political experience as a springboard and then focus on the Central American situation. It will seek to answer numerous questions concerning the political changes wrought by the evangelicals and the impact of those changes on security in the Central American region.

Some key questions addressed in this paper are

- Who are the evangelicals and what do they believe?
- How many evangelicals are there and how fast are they growing?
- What are the elements of evangelical doctrine and their concepts of contemporary society, political action, and social justice?
- What are the theory and practice of evangelical communities and the achievements and failures of the movement?
- What is the influence of evangelicalism on the political life of the United States and Central America?
- What rivalries exist between evangelicals and the Roman Catholics?

² Jim and Anne Ryun, “Courtship Makes a Comeback,” *Focus on the Family Magazine*, November, 1995, 7

³ CNN All Politics, “Candidate Profiles - Jim Ryun,” Available from <http://www.allpolitics.com>.

⁴ Ralph Reed, Chesapeake, VA, personal letter to author, Fairfax, VA, 15 November 1996.

- Will evangelical influences on Central American governments cause progress in solving the region's ills?
- Finally, what will be the effect of evangelical political influence on regional security concerns in a rapidly changing post-Cold War environment?

The sheer volume of material on the numerical growth and political influence of evangelicals in the Americas requires limiting this examination to the United States and the countries of Central America: Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. For example, a similar investigation of the same subject focused on Brazil alone would require an extensive research project of its own.

Historic Religious Influence on United States and Central American Politics

The influence of religion in politics in the United States and Central America is nothing new. Some may argue that political influence by religious activists is as old as the first European contact in the hemisphere.

Although some contemporary historians de-emphasize religion's role in hemispheric history in favor of the economic role, early North American settlers apparently came with a sense of religious zeal thoroughly mixed with their economic motivations. "Having undertaken for the glory of God and the advancement of the Christian faith," the Pilgrim settlers of Massachusetts set a precedent for citizens taking an active role in their self-government when they agreed to establish the Mayflower Compact in 1620.

"With a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence," North Americans created numerous basic documents that furthered Lockean propositions of contractual government. The US Founding Fathers included religious connotations in the Declaration of Independence and many other key pronouncements.

Religious fervor concerning the evil of slavery, especially among New England's evangelical Protestants, underpinned the North American abolitionist movement in the 19th Century. A popular song of 1854, *The Abolitionist Hymn*, had the following words:

Tis nature's need, 'tis God's decree;
 But let the hand that tills the soil
 Be, like the wind that fans it, free.⁵

⁵*Annals of America, Volume 8, 1850-1857*, "The Abolitionist's Hymn," (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1976), 265.

In more recent history, Protestant members of the clergy like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. provided key leadership for the 1960s civil rights movement in the United States.. Catholic priests like Philip Berrigan were outspoken and influential in protests against the Vietnam War and nuclear weapons during the 1960s and 1970s.

The rise of the so-called Religious Right during the 1980s was met with wide criticism from two quarters. There were liberals who perhaps forgot the precedents of leftist religious involvement in national politics and objected to the conservative nature of this new political movement. Also, some religious conservatives contended that political involvement was “worldly” and distracted from the church’s primary mission of spreading the Gospel. This paper will discuss the Religious Right in the United States in Chapter 3.

There is little question about the significant political influence religion, manifested by the Roman Catholic church, has had during five centuries of Central American history. Roman Catholic Spain and Portugal were supreme sea powers of the 15th and 16th Centuries. They were remarkably successful in exploring, colonizing, and establishing the Catholic faith throughout Central America. With support from the state, Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, Jesuits, and other religious orders were able to accompany early colonizers in search of Indian souls to convert. Although it is sometimes fashionable today to portray the early Catholic missionaries as toadies for the Conquistadors’ exploitation of indigenous peoples, some missionary successes

were evident. On the whole, conversion of the Indians actually meant a fusion of pagan and Christian religious ideas. This pagan influence on the Catholic Church in Central America persists in church culture to this day.⁶

Following independence of Latin American nations from Spain in the 1820’s, a definite trend toward anti-clericalism permeated the newly independent governments. Mexico, for example, adopted constitutional provisions of church-state separation that remain very influential in Mexican politics. Despite such policies, the Roman Catholic Church still wielded tremendous political, economic, and social power throughout the 19th and 20th Centuries. Numerically and culturally, Central America remains predominantly Roman Catholic today.⁷

Following World War II, the Roman Catholic church in Central America tended to identify itself with reactionary regimes. After the second Vatican Council (1962-65), a more radical and socially active Catholicism emerged along with the extremely influential and divisive concept of liberation theology.⁸

Liberation theology emphasized the rights of the poor and held that developed nations enriched themselves at the expense of developing nations. Prominent Central American

⁶ Benjamin Keene, “Latin America” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed.

⁷ Paul R. Aadnesen, “Past and Present Role of the Church and Religion in the Inter-American System,” (Course monograph, Inter-American Defense College, 1983), 11.

⁸ Ibid.

proponents of liberation theology were Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero of El Salvador and Marxist priest Ernesto Cardenal of Nicaragua. Liberation theology proponents insisted their activities were based on the love of Christ. Opponents criticized them for being pawns of Marxist revolutionaries.⁹

Incursions of Protestantism into Central America began with the arrival of European and North American missionaries as early as the 17th Century. For centuries the Roman Catholic Church completely overshadowed Protestant influence on Central American society. That all began to change in the 1960s which marked the beginning of rapid evangelical growth.

The remainder of this paper will deal with evangelicalism's phenomenal growth and resultant impact on the politics and security of Central America. But first, what is the definition of evangelicalism?

CHAPTER TWO

“WHAT DOES ‘EVANGELICAL’ MEAN? IT DEPENDS ON WHO YOU ASK.”¹⁰

Evangelicalism Defined

The word “evangelical,” like many subjective terms and titles dealing with things religious, cultural or political, means different things to different people. According to Carl F.H. Henry, a founding editor of the influential US magazine, *Christianity Today*, “There are a variety of depictions and definitions of evangelicals and most of them are far from accurate.”¹¹ This chapter will define evangelicalism, its doctrine, and its political expression.

The root of the English word “evangelical” is the Greek word *euangelismos*, which means “good news.” The word came into common usage during the Protestant Reformation as reformers styled themselves as recovering the good news of the Gospel of Christ. In parts of Europe and

⁹ Phillip Barryman, *Liberation Theology*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 5.

¹⁰ Religious News Service, “What Does Evangelical Mean? It Depends on Who You Ask,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, 15 December 1996, 23.

¹¹ Ibid.

throughout Latin America, the term evangelical (or *evangélico* in Spanish) is often synonymous with the word Protestant.

Semantic complexity abounds concerning terms used to describe evangelicals in the US and Central America. Liberal or “mainline” Protestants, who emphasize a social gospel of education, social reform, and anti-militarism, might take offense if the term evangelical was applied to them. Similarly, some evangelicals do not like the title, “fundamentalist.” The media now associate that term, which formerly simply meant a believer in Biblical inerrancy, with narrow-mindedness and Islamic militancy.

Still another term, “born again,” refers to the spiritual rebirth at conversion described by Christ in Bible (John 3). It is often used to describe evangelicals. This term came into wide usage during the administration of US President Jimmy Carter who identified himself as a “born again Christian.” In Guatemala, many evangelical Protestants prefer the simple title of “Christian.” Still other terms are “neopentecostal” or “charismatic” that generally refer to mainline Protestants or Roman Catholics who have Pentecostal experiences but prefer to remain within their own churches.

Pentecostalism is an extremely important branch of US evangelicalism and is perhaps an even more important player in Central America. University of Southern Illinois Latin American scholar Dr. Richard Millett estimated that 70% of Central American evangelicals are Pentecostal.¹² Many Latin Americans incorrectly refer to any Protestant as a Pentecostal. Pentecostals adhere to evangelical doctrine but have additional beliefs in their tradition dealing with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Most distinctive of these beliefs is “speaking in tongues” which Pentecostals base on early Christian church accounts in the Book of Acts. It is common in a Pentecostal church service anywhere in the world to observe worshippers praying or speaking in what Pentecostals often describe as a “heavenly language.” According to the Pentecostals, the Holy Spirit prompts the use of the language.¹³

To add to the confusion, Latin American Roman Catholics often refer to all Protestant denominations as “sects” along with groups like the Mormons, Unification Church, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Though these groups are increasing in number in Latin America like the evangelicals, they are well outside the pale of historical Protestant orthodoxy.

For the sake of simplicity, this paper will refer to all Protestants as evangelicals or *evangélicos*. More important than titles, what does it mean to be an evangelical?

Evangelical Doctrine

¹² Richard Millett, interview by author, Inter-American Defense College, Washington, DC, 19 February 1997.

¹³ Assemblies of God Office of Public Relations, *Assemblies of God Prospective-General Christian Doctrine* (Springfield, MO: Assemblies of God, 1995), 5.

The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), one of the most influential US evangelical organization, represents 77 churches and organizations and 27 million members. The association points to its Statement of Faith to define the term evangelical. The statement is a concise presentation of historical orthodox Christian belief that evangelicals world-wide might embrace. It reads

1. We believe the Bible to be the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God.
2. We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
3. We believe in the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, in His virgin birth, in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood, in His bodily resurrection, in His ascension to the right hand of the Father, and in His personal return in power and glory.
4. We believe that for the salvation of lost and sinful people, regeneration by the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential.
5. We believe in the present ministry of the Holy Spirit by whose indwelling the Christian is enabled to live a godly life.
6. We believe in the resurrection of both the saved and the lost; they that are saved unto the resurrection of life and they that are lost unto the resurrection of damnation.
7. We believe in the spiritual unity of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁴

According to Rafael Rottman Chang, a former member of the Guatemalan Congress, evangelical moral standards go beyond legalistic compliance with religious strictures. They are rather based on a loving and very personal spiritual relationship with the “living God” that results in a godly daily lifestyle. That lifestyle reflects the nature of Christ into families, communities, and whole societies. “The Bible’s formula is simple,” said Rottman. “Our minds are to be renewed and we are to put on a new nature. Our lives should be like that of Jesus.”¹⁵

Do Central American evangelicals share these doctrinal descriptions? In describing Central American evangelicalism, researcher Richard F. Nyrop observed, “Evangelicals are not oriented toward doctrinal orthodoxy; they emphasize the individual believer’s direct personal

¹⁴ National Association of Evangelicals, *Statement of Faith*, available from <http://nae.goshen.net>.

¹⁵ Rafael Rottman Chang, interview by author, 14 February 1997, Bolling Air Force Base, DC.

relationship to God. In contrast to mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics, who have come to see redressing the social scales as essential to any widely shared improvement in the lives of the faithful, evangelicals are highly individualistic in focus. They are less concerned with organizing an elaborate institutional infrastructure than with preaching the Word to society as a whole.”¹⁶

If US and Central American evangelicals share a general set of beliefs emphasizing an individual direct personal relationship with God, how do those beliefs affect their politics and their society? In practical terms, if an evangelical is enabled by the Holy Spirit “to live a godly life,” just what does that mean and, more importantly, how does it affect the evangelical political agenda?

Evangelical Political Agenda

In his 1996 book *Our Hopes, Our Dreams*, Gary Bauer, former Reagan Administration policy advisor and executive director of the Family Research Council, drafted the following compact that sought to encapsulate the political and cultural priorities of US evangelicals.

1. In our family life, we promise to remain faithful to our spouse “until death do us part.” If our marriage becomes troubled, we will seek out every available resource to support and maintain our partnership, for our mutual benefit and the benefit of any children present.
2. We promise to pursue every available means to maximize the amount of time we spend with our families, recognizing our responsibilities to our spouse, our children, and our extended kin. We will work to establish good communication and conflict resolution patterns in our families.
3. We promise to be closely involved in the education of our children. We will help them in their studies, continually monitor their academic progress, and pay particular attention to teaching them reliable standards of right and wrong.
4. We promise to raise our sons and daughters to respect and appreciate the opposite gender, to recognize the unique and irreplaceable contributions of fathers and mothers in family life, and to preserve the gift of human sexuality for marriage.
5. We promise to spread wings of protection around our children, shielding them from violent or sexually exploitative media of all kinds, whether television, film, literature, or music. Conscious of the damage done by desensitization, we will set a good example for them by avoiding such materials and by refusing to allow even legitimate media presentation to dominate family time in our household. We will also avoid drug and alcohol abuse and will encourage those around us--children, neighbors, friends--to do likewise.
6. In our work and community life, we promise to elevate a public ethic of individual merit, regardless of ethnic or national origin or political or religious belief. We will not tolerate the expression,

¹⁶Richard F. Nyrop, *Guatemala: A Country Study*, (Washington, DC: The American University, 1983), 75.

public or private, of bigotry on any such basis. We will judge all persons we meet by the content of their character, not the color of their skin.

7. We promise to work hard to support ourselves and our families and to engage in various volunteer programs and activities that enrich our neighborhoods and communities. We will seek to protect the weaker members of our society, including the aged, the sick, the unborn, and the needy. We recognize our personal responsibility to address problems associated with poverty in our community.

8. We promise to carry out our duties as citizens: to vote in all election, to follow and participate in the ongoing public debate, to serve on juries, to study our nation's history, and to honor the memory of those in every generation whose actions have defended and preserved our way of life. We will look for community solutions to community problems.

9. We promise to behave courteously and ethically. We will take full responsibility for our mistakes and misdeeds, not blaming other or allowing others to suffer blame for our wrongdoing. With the exception of utter mental incapacity, we will not excuse or exonerate others of responsibility for their misdeeds and the consequences thereof. We recognize the right and duty of the state to punish transgressors of the law, and we will treat those in authority with the respect befitting their office. We will restore and practice everyday signs of courtesy and respect in our neighborhoods and cities and we will resent no courtesy offered to us by others.

10. In our personal lives, we promise to seek to honor the Creator, who made us and endowed us with such inalienable right as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We will practice our faith daily and will gather with others to worship regularly. Without resorting to coercion or vilification, we will encourage faith, and the fruits of faith, in others.

11. For public officials: I will do everything in my capacity as a public servant, by official word and deed, to reinforce the contractual undertaking enumerated above. I will do everything in my power to ensue that public policy buttresses and supports the American people in their roles as citizens, spouses, parents, and neighbors.¹⁷

The above framework was apparent in the legislative agenda supported by religious activists in the 105th Congress. They included a \$500-per-child tax credit, the banning of partial birth abortions, restrictions on federally financed abortions, school prayer, school choice, parental rights in raising their children, limiting special rights for homosexuals, welfare reform, banning euthanasia, and initiatives to punish religious persecution overseas.¹⁸

¹⁷ Gary Bauer, *Our Hopes, Our Dreams: A Vision for America*, (Colorado Springs: Focus on the Family Publishing, 1996) 145.

¹⁸ *Christianity Today*, "Christian Conservatives Have Unfinished Business," 6 January 1997, 56.

Central American evangelicals have a similar, although somewhat less specific, vision for their nations. Guatemalan politician Rafael Rottman Chan related that the evangelicals would like to ultimately see that “Jesús es Señor de Guatemala (Jesus is Lord of Guatemala).”¹⁹

London School of Economics professor David Martin suggested that, rather than specific agendas, the evangelical ambition is to constitute an effective pressure group to forward corporate institutional issues based on broad moral principles. “Thus the initial impact of evangelical conversion occurs not through overt political action but in terms of a major mutation of culture: the restoration of the family, the rejection of *machismo*, the adoption of economic and work disciplines and new priorities.”²⁰

Considering the level of secularism in culture today, these evangelical visions for cultural and political change may seem as unusual to some as Representative Ryun’s thoughts on his daughter’s courtship. Despite this, US and Central American evangelicals have developed considerable influence. The next chapters will examine those rises to positions of influence.

CHAPTER THREE

EVANGELICAL INFLUENCE ON UNITED STATES POLITICS

The Rise of the Religious Right

The so-called Religious Right in the United States has garnered remarkable political power. They have extended their success so far that even Democrats, much to the chagrin of the party’s left wing, have scrambled to appease the Right’s pro-family agenda. President Clinton even placed campaign ads on large market Christian radio stations during the 1996 campaign. Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition, the foremost Religious Right organization, resolutely proclaimed, “Conservative evangelicals were the firewall that prevented a Bob Dole defeat from mushrooming into a meltdown all the way down the ballot.”²¹

¹⁹ Rottman Chang, interview by author.

²⁰ David Martin, “The Evangelical Upsurge and Its Political Implications” (unpublished article), (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1997, photocopied), 3.

²¹ Kim A. Lawton, “Back to the Future,” *Christianity Today*, 6 January 1997, 54.

How did the Religious Right obtain its current status? What are their prospects for retaining it? What might be future outcomes of its position of influence?

According to political scientists Mark Rozell and Clyde Wilcox, the latest powerful development of the Religious Right followed a shaky start. The 1980's development of the Religious Right was marked by religious purism and political amateurism typified by Reverend Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority. The Moral Majority had no grassroots organization, a reputation for religious intolerance even toward those who were potential supporters, and a message of heated rhetoric. The organization subsequently folded.²²

The Religious Right of the 1990s was a different story. The movement "grew up" and their successes culminated in broadened conservative influence in the Republican majority 104th and 105th Congresses. The Christian Right strengthened local organizational structure, began coalition building with Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, and mainline Protestants, and began using pragmatic and sophisticated strategies. The movement seems to have moved from shaky expansionism to genuine political institutionalization.

The Institutionalization of the Religious Right

This institutionalization of the Religious Right was the result in two deliberate strategies. The movement avoided use of religious language in political forums and broadened their appeal by embracing traditional conservative issue of taxes, government spending, and crime in addition to the "cultural issues" of abortion, pornography, and education. The "get half a loaf now in order get the whole loaf later" approach now predominates within the Religious Right.²³

The Christian Coalition clearly demonstrated its maturity and institutionalization when it proposed a change in tactics early in 1997. The Coalition announced support of a plan to transfer the mechanism for providing economic assistance from government agencies to faith-based organizations. The group also has called for school vouchers so parents of school children can pay for attendance at their choice of private, public, secular, or religious schools.²⁴ In an atmosphere of popular reductions in inefficient welfare spending and concern over an expensive but dysfunctional public education system, the Christian Coalition struck a popular chord with voters.

The Religious Right still faces the dilemma of getting its constituency out of the pews and into the rough and tumble of politics. That stigma of "worldly" politics remains but the movement has been eminently successful in getting people of faith motivated, trained, and active in campaigning.

²²Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox, "Second Coming: The Strategies of the New Christian Right," *Political Science Quarterly*, (Volume 111, No. 2, 1996), 271.

²³Mathew Moen, "From Revolution to Evolution: The Changing Nature of the Christian Right," *Sociology of Religion*, Fall 1994, 348-353.

²⁴Phil Baum, "Statement of Executive Director," (Washington, DC: American Jewish Congress, 30 January 1997), available from <http://pmewswire.com>.

The future of the Religious Right is uncertain. Will its main strength, a highly motivated constituency, be weakened by its attempts at “mainstreaming” and institutionalizing their movement? Will its general influence draw US politics and culture closer to their position?

A general trend toward political conservatism in the United States is likely to further enhance the influence of the Religious Right. In the next century, an entrenched and institutionalized Religious Right may see its effect on elections exceed that of organized labor in labor’s heyday of the 1960s and 1970s. Conceivably, the corner church could replace the union hall as a place for mixing daily business with political activism. Some people of faith may be uncomfortable with the politicization of their churches but others will see activism as the only way to salvage a flagging secular society.

One thing is certain. The Religious Right has succeeded in building a very formidable political movement that has had a major impact on US politics in a very short period of time. Could the same thing happen in Central America?

CHAPTER FOUR

EVANGELICAL GROWTH IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Religions at a Crossroads

This chapter will examine the dramatic growth of evangelicalism in Central America. A significant player in this socio-political drama is, of course, the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholics are at a crossroads as they seek to deal with rival evangelicalism after centuries of near monopoly political, economic, and cultural influence. According to one evangelical missionary, “Latin America is a Catholic region, but there’s no reason to assume that this need always be so.”²⁵

²⁵*Global Church Growth*, “Dawn is about to Break on Guatemala,” March-April 1984, 351.

Are evangelicals really increasing in number in Central America? If so, what is the reason? Are some Central Americans disenchanted with the Roman Catholic church? What has been the Roman Catholic response to the evangelical challenge? Finally, what is the future of *los evangélicos* in the region?

Evangelical Growth: How Much and Why?

Evangelicalism is undeniable growing very rapidly throughout Latin America. Evangelical churches in all Latin American countries have seen significant growth and in some countries the growth has been astounding. According to one source, evangelicals in all of Latin America now number between 40 and 60 million, about 10% of the total population.²⁶ Evangelical expansion in Central America follows a similar pattern.

In Guatemala, evangelicals rose from an insignificant and ostracized minority in the 1950s to a prominent place in national society in the 1990s. At least one-third of the population is evangelical. Because of the low rate of Roman Catholic church attendance, evangelicals are the largest group of active church-goers in the nation. Since 1975, their growth has outstripped Guatemala's general population growth.²⁷

According to Library of Congress researcher Tim Merrill, "Largely because of the Pentecostals, the long-stagnant Nicaraguan Protestant population has accelerated in numbers, going from three percent of the national population in 1965 to more than 20 percent in 1990.

It could easily surpass 30 percent in the 1990s."²⁸ The Socio-Cultural Analysis Center at Managua's Central American University projected that the number of evangelicals in Nicaragua will triple between 1975 and 2000.²⁹

In Honduras, evangelical churches, including Methodist, Church of God, Seventh Day Adventist, and Assemblies of God denominations, have undergone tremendous growth. Between 1978 and 1985, the number of Honduran evangelicals doubled to 12 percent of Hondurans of total population.³⁰

²⁶Russell Watson, "Visiting the Region This Week, the Pope Tries to Stem the Tide of New Protestant Reformation," *Christianity Today*, 12 February 1996, 1.

²⁷Tom Barry, *Inside Guatemala*, (Albuquerque, NM: The Inter-Hemispheric Education Resource Center, 1992), 187.

²⁸Tim Merrill, *Nicaragua: A Country Study*, (Washington, DC: Library of Congress 1994), 86.

²⁹Juanita Darling, "New Faith for Latin America," *Los Angeles Times*, 5 February 1996, A1.

³⁰World Vision, *Análisis de la Realidad Nacional de Honduras*, (Colorado Springs: World Vision, 1988), 1

Panama's *mestizo* population experienced the bulk of evangelical growth. Observers pegged that growth at 4.7% annually during the 1960s and 1970s. Pentecostal churches saw nearly all of that increase.³¹

In 1990, 18% of Salvadorans called themselves evangelicals and more than 3,300 evangelical churches operated in the country. The Pentecostal Assemblies of God of El Salvador led the way with aggressive evangelistic and church-building efforts.³²

The Assemblies of God and other Pentecostal churches have also been responsible for evangelical growth in Costa Rica. By the end of the 1980s sixteen percent of the Costa Rican population identified themselves as evangelical.³³

In Belize, the Roman Catholic church membership dropped drastically from 70% of the population in 1970 to 50% today. The evangelical boom, led by North American denominations like the Assemblies of God and non-denominational ministries like Campus Crusade for Christ and Youth with a Mission, has been "one of the most striking changes in Belizean society."³⁴

Chart 1 on page 15 details Central American evangelical growth from 1960 to 1985 with extrapolations to 2010. The extrapolations are based on 1960-1985 growth rates. Extrapolated evangelical population percentages range from 126.8% in Guatemala, 66.5% in El Salvador, 50.8% in Honduras, 21.4% in Panama, 17.7% in Nicaragua, to 15.1% in Costa Rica. At its historical growth rates, all Guatemalans would theoretically be evangelicals early in the next century. Statistics for Belize were not available.

Chart 1
Estimate of Evangelical Growth Factors in Central America from 1960 to 1985 with Extrapolation to 2010³⁵

(1960-1985 national growth factors included in parentheses)

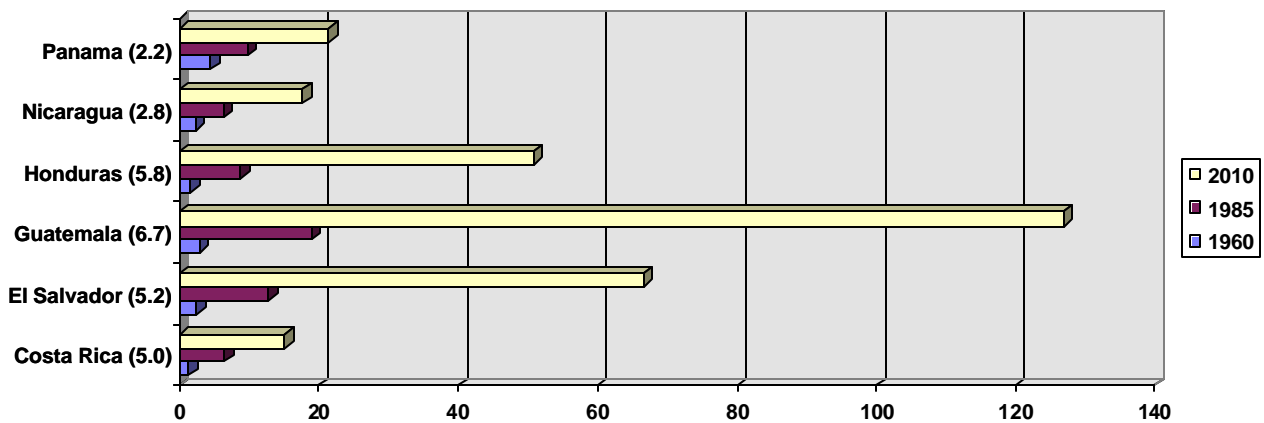
³¹Barry, *Central America: The Essential Guide to Its Societies, Politics, and Economics*, (New York: Grove Weiderfeld, 1991), 210.

³²Resource Center, *Directory and Analysis: Private Organizations with US Connections - El Salvador*, (Albuquerque, NM: Resource Center, 1988), 1.

³³PROLADES, *Directorio de Iglesias, Organizaciones, y Ministros del Movimiento Protestante: Costa Rica*, (San José, Costa Rica: PROLADES, 1986), 7.

³⁴Barry, *Central America: The Essential Guide to Its Societies, Politics, and Economics*, 68.

³⁵David Stoll, *Is Latin American Turning Protestant?* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990, 337.



Percentage of Evangelicals in Total Population

There are numerous explanations that as to why evangelicals are growing in number. The evangelicals themselves certainly might consider rapid growth a unique blessing from God. Other observers point to the factors listed here:

1) Converts of evangelical churches found themselves safer because social activism made Catholics the targets of violence. Evangelical churches were more neutral and, in many cases, evangelical affiliation was “safety” motivated.³⁶

2) The Roman Catholic clergy did not meet the needs of traditional constituencies or were simply unavailable. In some countries, the church hierarchy withdrew priests from rural areas for their own safety during insurrections, perhaps when the people needed them most. The shortage of Catholic priests has been severe for many years along with an even more pronounced shortage of native priests.³⁷ In Panama, for example, at least 75% of Catholic clergy are foreign missionaries and only 20% of identified Catholics attend mass regularly.³⁸

3) During times of national crisis such as the 1976 Guatemalan earthquake and the civil wars during the 1980s, evangelicals were particularly active in relief efforts. Their actions enhanced their reputation and popularity.³⁹

4) Evangelical converts rejected politicized social activism as exemplified by liberation theology and withdrew from often violent and unstable lifestyles.⁴⁰

5) The evangelicals’ moral strictness won them the support of many women who have long suffered the Latin cultural norm of male *machismo*.⁴¹

³⁶Barry, *Central America Inside Out: The Essential Guide to Its Societies, Politics, and Economics*, 189.

³⁷Millett, interview by author.

³⁸Bertrand de la Grange, “Church Drops Neutral Facade,” *Miami Herald*, 21 May 1989, 1.

³⁹Nyrop, *Guatemala: A Country Study*, 76.

⁴⁰Richard A. Haggerty, *El Salvador: A Country Study*, 96.

⁴¹Fiona Neill, “Catholics, Evangelicals Vie for Latin America’s Soul,” *Reuters News Service*, 31 January 1996.

6) In rural areas with no permanent Roman Catholic priest, the evangelical pastor was sometimes the only religious influence in town.⁴²

7) An evangelical church was easy to establish. Evangelicals did not need a church building or seminary-trained priest. An evangelical pastor with no advanced seminary education could start a church in a home or small storefront.⁴³

8) People emigrating from small rural communities to large urban areas could recapture a sense of community by involvement in evangelical fellowships. The Catholic Church provided weak spiritual care and failed to cut bureaucracy, train lay leaders, and establish a sense of community.⁴⁴

9) Evangelicals simply worked harder in reaching their converts and then ministering to their needs afterwards. According to Rev. Gilberto Aguierre, director of the Nicaraguan Evangelical Conference for Development, evangelicals have “a great interest in increasing their numbers and they work at this goal very hard.” In a Salvadoran university survey, more than two-thirds of evangelicals reported recent visits by their pastor compared to only one-quarter of practicing Catholics.⁴⁵

10) Evangelicals strongly supported education and literacy due to their insistence that everyone should read their own Bible. Evangelicals took advantage of the general increase in Central American literacy by publishing and distributing literature promoting evangelicalism “by the bale.”⁴⁶

The following observations of Library of Congress researcher Richard Haggerty may best summarize the core reasons for evangelical growth:

The popularity of evangelical Protestantism seems to have correlated with the intensity and nature of population displacement. As the number of land-poor laborers grew and migrant labor increased, the bonds of community, extended family and tradition were broken for many. Traditional Catholicism was unable to fill the personal sense of emotional loss and lack of direction. This was particularly true because the number of priests and clerics was small. Protestantism, however, offered a personalistic message of Jesus’ acceptance of the individual, emphasized each individual’s direct relationship to God unmediated by a hierarchical clergy, and held out hope that sustained even desperately poor people with a sense of self-worth in the face of violence, displacement, and misery.

⁴²Amy L. Sherman, “Evangelicals and Politics in Latin America” *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Summer, 1991, 24.

⁴³Rottman Chang interview by author.

⁴⁴Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* 33.

⁴⁵Darling, “New Faith for Latin America.”

⁴⁶Millett interview by author.

The elite found an ideological ally in this brand of Protestantism, not only for its apolitical approach but also for its laissez-faire, entrepreneurial, work-oriented values and its willingness to minimize the responsibility of the existing system for the nation's ills.⁴⁷

Evangelical-Roman Catholic Rivalry

After over five centuries of virtual monopoly, the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America understandably reacted strongly to the rivalry of the evangelicals. Each day on average, 8,000 baptized Roman Catholics in Latin America convert to evangelical Protestantism.⁴⁸

A 1992 speech given by Pope John Paul II in the Dominican Republic employed the terms "sects" and "rapacious wolves" to describe non-Catholic movements. While it is unclear whether the Pope intended to include evangelicals in his definition of "rapacious wolves," other Catholic leaders certainly did. Evangelicals have considered their efforts in drawing converts from the Roman Catholic Church as biblical-based evangelism. On the other hand, many Catholics have considered the activity "proselytizing." Proselytizing connotes drawing in of converts by force or misrepresentation.⁴⁹

The Roman Catholic Church throughout Latin America has generally grounded its criticism of evangelicalism on three points: 1) evangelicalism disrupts the historical and cultural continuity of Roman Catholicism in Latin America society, 2) evangelicalism is a divisive influence in families and local communities, and 3) evangelicalism is a "foreign (North American) influence."⁵⁰

According to the Bishops of Alta and Baja California, evangelical efforts are inappropriate because "many...Hispanic people have lived all their lives in a thoroughly Catholic environment and have been formed as Christians by the tradition, culture, piety and religious practices of the Catholic Church. We feel (the evangelicals display) a lack of understanding and appreciation for both of the rich history of the Catholic faith in Hispanic culture and the theology of baptism."⁵¹

Missionologist Cecil Robeck suggested this judgment was unfair. He pointed to the existence of a native Hispanic evangelical culture in the region for over 100 years. Robeck also stated that it was difficult to convince evangelicals that nominal Catholics who rarely or never attend Mass are "Christian" and thus off limits to Protestant evangelism.⁵²

⁴⁷Haggerty, *El Salvador: A Country Study*, 96.

⁴⁸Russell Watson, "John Paul Goes to War," *Newsweek*, 12 February 1996, 39.

⁴⁹Cecil Robeck Jr., "Mission and the Issue of Proselytism," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, January, 1996, 2.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 4.

⁵¹Alta/Baja California Bishops, "Dimensions of a Response to Proselytism," *Origins: CNS Documentary Service*, 15 March 1990, 666-69.

⁵²Robeck Jr., "Mission and the Issue of Proselytism," 4.

On the second point, the Most Reverend Pastor Cuquejo, Military Ordinary of Paraguay, stated in a 1992 interview, “When one looks at those of our Christian communities where a (evangelical) sect has come in aggressively, such communities suffer real division and upset. Erstwhile neighbors no longer speak to one another or break off relations. At the human level, that is already the most serious sort of problem.”⁵³

Evangelicals admit that conversions within long-time Roman Catholic families and communities can be divisive. However, they insist evangelical conversions actually enhance family and community relations by encouraging sobriety, marital fidelity, and family and community reconciliation and cooperation.⁵⁴

On the third point, Catholic leadership has contended that “some groups are spending a lot of money to attack the Catholic church in Latin America and the United States is surely behind it.” One Salvadoran archbishop even suggested that the evangelicals were “pay back” from the United States for the progressive stands the Catholic Church had taken.⁵⁵

It is true that evangelical missionaries from North America and Europe originally brought their religion to Central America in the 18th Century and that the most recent dynamic growth was influenced by visits and television crusades by prominent North American evangelists like Pat Robertson in the 1970s and 1980s. However, there is little to indicate that the evangelical movement is now more than a “homegrown” phenomenon.⁵⁶

According to Latin American consultant Mark Chump of International Conflict Skills, “Evangelicals were originally accused of being part of a foreign intervention from the US and, indeed, many of their resources still come from outside the country. However, since the vast majority of evangelical leadership is now indigenous, that criticism is no longer justified.”⁵⁷

The future of evangelical-Roman Catholic rivalry may continue to be rocky but in no place in Central America has the rivalry turned violent as has happened in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. According to the Associated Press more than 25,000 evangelical Christians have been expelled from their homes in Chiapas in the last 25 years due to resentment by their Catholic neighbors.⁵⁸

Hopeful signs of reconciliation have occurred between evangelicals and Roman Catholics . According to *Christianity Today Magazine*,

⁵³Most Reverend Pastor Cuquejo, “Interview,” *America Magazine*, 28 November 1992, 420.

⁵⁴“Evangelicals Stepping on Catholic Toes in Latin America,” *National Public Radio, Morning Edition*, 12 December 1994.

⁵⁵Edward L. Cleary, “John Paul Cries Wolf: Misreading the Pentecostals,” *Commonweal*, 20 November 1992, 7.

⁵⁶Watson, “John Paul Goes to War,” 39.

⁵⁷Mark Chump, interview by author, Inter-American Defense College, Washington, DC, 29 October 1996.

⁵⁸*Associated Press*, 25 November 1996.

Roman Catholic and Pentecostal officials met for a week long session in July in Bressanone, Italy, to discuss tensions over conversion methods, particularly in Latin America. Participants from eight countries, representing denominations that included the Assemblies of God and International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, issued a joint statement with the Vatican that said, 'Preliminary findings suggest that Catholics and Pentecostals have much in common on which they can build, provided they can develop further patience and trust with each other. Signs of cooperation have already emerged.'⁵⁹

Evangelical growth and evangelical-Roman Catholic rivalry are likely to continue to be fixtures in Central American society. These developments have the potential of making fundamental changes in Central American politics. Chapter Five will examine those changes.

CHAPTER FIVE

⁵⁹"Roman Catholic and Pentecostal Officials Meet," *Christianity Today Magazine*, 7 October 1996, 92.

EVANGELICAL INFLUENCE ON CENTRAL AMERICAN POLITICS

The Nature of Evangelical Political Influence

Are Central American evangelicals members of a politically powerful “ruling class,” components of a sophisticated and increasingly powerful middle class, or members of a poorly educated and disadvantaged lower class? Are they reactionary heirs to historical Central American *caudillismo* or vanguards of democratic political, economic, and social reform? The evidence concerning the nature of evangelicals and their politics is mixed. However, without a doubt, evangelicals are increasing in political power in the region.

According to a survey by the Central American University in San Salvador, evangelicals are not members of a “ruling class” or a politically sophisticated middle class. The university’s 1993 nationwide study indicated that most Protestant converts from Catholicism appear to the poor and poorly educated. Poor Salvadorans were three times as likely to be evangelical as the rich and while 23% of evangelicals said they had not finished grade school, only 15% reported having college degrees.⁶⁰

The economic status and future economic potential of Central Americans evangelicals are subject to debate. One study found that, although Guatemalan evangelical converts were often recruited from lower socio-economic groups under great economic pressure, they tended to improve their economic condition over time.⁶¹ Another study of Salvadoran evangelicals found evangelicals consistently in the lowest income ranks. They had not produced personal savings to match identified Roman Catholics or differentiate themselves from Salvadorans without any religious affiliation.⁶²

That lower socio-economic character may be changing. A prominent member of Guatemala City’s El Verbo Church, a rapidly growing Pentecostal congregation, speculated that the evangelical movement is increasing middle class. He presented anecdotal evidence of increasing problems with inadequate parking space at urban evangelical churches. This implied that evangelical church members increasing possessed that sure sign of middle class affluence, an automobile. The member observed, “The Catholic churches have no such parking problems.”⁶³

⁶⁰Darling, “New Faith for Latin America.”

⁶¹James D. Seton, “Protestant Modernization in Two Guatemalan Towns,” *American Ethnologist* 5 (1978), 280-302.

⁶²Kenneth M. Coleman, Edwin Eloy Aguilar, José Miguel Sandoval, and Timothy J. Steigenga, “Protestantism in El Salvador: Conventional Wisdom Versus the Survey Evidence,” *Latin American Research Review* 28 (1993), 119-140.

⁶³Cesar Ruiz-Morales, Colonel, Guatemalan Army, Military Attache of the Guatemalan Embassy, interview by author, Washington, DC, 4 February 1997.

Researcher Tom Barry of the Albuquerque based Inter-Hemisphere Education Resource Center summed up Central America's religious transformation in this way:

The turmoil and violence of the last decade has disrupted Central American society and resulted in the emergence of new social forces. Changing religious beliefs, rising crime, and cultural disintegration have been among the results. Capitalizing on the social chaos, Pentecostal churches have drawn believers away from the Catholic Church in droves. At least one-third of Guatemalans now belong to evangelical churches. Although accelerated by the region's economic and political crisis, the religious transformation of Central America has deeper historical and social roots. The institutional Catholic church, constrained by its rigid hierarchies, paternalistic traditions, and abstruse dogmas, has proved unable to respond to the emotional and spiritual needs of the changing Central American society. For many, the Catholic Church represents the feudal past while the evangelical churches are part of a modernizing trend that preaches individual salvation.

The long term political implications of this religious upheaval are difficult to predict. For the time being, the Catholic Church remains the most important social institution in Central America. In some countries, notably El Salvador and Guatemala, it has used this position of influence to advance peaceful solutions to conflicts and to speak forcefully on behalf of the disenfranchised. Except in Nicaragua, where Cardinal Obando y Bravo allied himself with the *contras*, the Church has not clearly positioned itself on one side of a violent conflict. For the most part, the Catholic Church has backed away from its former ties with the oligarchy and acted as a force for moderation and social peace, careful not to identify itself with the militant voices of the popular movements. The new evangelical churches, in contrast, have served as a popular foundation for political conservatism, most clearly illustrated by the Ríos Montt phenomenon in Guatemala. Over time, however, more progressive tendencies within the evangelical community might emerge and be able to steer the movement away from its present reactionary direction.⁶⁴

Do evangelicals impose a "reactionary direction" in Central American politics as suggested by Barry? There is evidence that evangelicals, like their North American brethren, tend to be conservative in their politics. There is little evidence to support the notion that evangelicals are anti-democratic reactionaries.

Some sources seem certain that evangelicalism is politically reactionary. For example, writer Jean-Pierre Bastian insisted that Pentecostalism, the most influential branch of Central American evangelicalism, is an irrational religion "of oral tradition, illiteracy and effervescence" that reinforces "caudillist models of religious and social control." As a result, Bastian remarked, Pentecostalism in Latin America has "no relation whatsoever...with political and social reform."⁶⁵

⁶⁴Barry, *Central America Inside Out: The Essential Guide to Its Societies, Politics, and Economics*, 21.

⁶⁵Jean-Pierre Bastian, *Breve historia del protestantismo en América Latina*, (Mexico City: Casa Unida de Publicaciones, 1986), 332.

Others have accused evangelicals of supporting authoritarianism due to their Biblical based (Romans 13) belief in obeying existing political authorities. One critic charged, “The fatalism embodied in (evangelical) doctrine is a near total acceptance of authority.”⁶⁶

A *Los Angeles Times* reporter believed the growth of the evangelicals might spell the end of Latin American democracy all together when he said, “Unless the (evangelical) trend is reversed, (Central America will face) a strong likelihood of increased military dominance and of economic power remaining in the hands of a wealthy oligarchy.”⁶⁷

“Absurd,” responded Richard Millett of the University of Southern Illinois. “If anything the evangelicals have been accused of lacking political activity. In their sermons the villains are nearly always the rich and powerful. They push education and literacy hard which erodes traditional authoritarian *patrón-cliente* relationships and that certainly encourages democratic pluralism. Some of these reporters don’t understand the evangelicals. They should confront the evangelicals directly and listen to their sermons to avoid making poor assumptions about the nature of evangelicalism.”⁶⁸

In his detailed study of Latin American evangelicalism, *Tongues of Fire*, author David Martin refuted accusations of evangelical political authoritarianism as unrealistic. He observed that evangelicals have a general suspicion of political activity but do vote and do become politically involved. He reported that, in some cases, evangelical church pastors directed the voting of their congregations similar to traditional *hacienda* style in which a *patrón* would direct voting of employees. Martin rejected the contention of authoritarian tendencies and observed that many evangelicals supported populist leftists while others supported conservative anti-crime candidates. Martin further observed that evangelicals were consistently anti-Communist which has furthered democratic stabilization.⁶⁹

Martin also suggested that evangelicalism is a Latin American agent of democratization just as Puritanism and Methodism were in 17th and 18th Century North America. He indicated the evangelical revival in Latin America is simply a continuation of the Reformation struggle between Protestantism and Catholicism. He maintained that evangelical modernity has challenged Roman Catholic spiritual monopolies that discourage the pluralism necessary for a democratic society.⁷⁰

A 1993 sociological study of Salvadoran evangelicals found them “distinguished primarily by their lack of political uniqueness. They are not political apologists for the right. Nor are they supporters of the insurrectionary left.”⁷¹

⁶⁶Paul Lewis, “With Bible in Hand, Evangelicals Come Marching In,” *New York Times*, 15 June 1989, 1.

⁶⁷Kenneth Freed, “Christianity’s Holy War in Guatemala,” *Los Angeles Times*, 13 May 1990, A.

⁶⁸Millett, interview by author.

⁶⁹David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) 236-239.

⁷⁰Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* 12.

Rather than closely identifying with a Latin American version of the US Religious Right, the evangelicals seem to emphasize spiritual aspects of societal problems. They frequently blame Latin American violence and backwardness not to foreign dependency or an unfair class structure, but to lax morality perpetrated by an indifferent Catholic Church. Thus it follows, say evangelicals, that moral transformation is the answer to poverty and strife.⁷²

When considering liberation theology, observers usually think in terms of the Catholic Church, sometimes in association with ecumenical Protestants. However, they never identify liberation theology with evangelicals. The evangelical case against liberation theology was simple. Whereas Christ located sin in the hearts of men, evangelicals argued, liberation theology attributed it to social structures. Whereas evangelicals believed individuals achieved salvation through personal rebirth, liberation theology reduced it to the revolutionary idea that only a social upheaval could redeem humanity. In other words, the evangelical's solution to the world's problems was spiritual.⁷³

In contrast, according to a 1993 analysis by the *Economist*, many Latin American Catholics and leftists do not see the rise of evangelical Protestantism as a spiritual issue, but as a political one. The rise threatened decades of pursuit of social justice through liberation theology and conjured up conspiratorial notions of evangelicals oppressing the poor due to their promotion of individual advancement rather than collective action.

That notion seemed to be supported by the fact that early evangelicals were bankrolled by US money and seemed comfortable supporting the political status quo in return for advancement. The *Economist* cited evangelical support of General Augusto Pinochet in Chile and former evangelical president Efraim Rios Montt in Guatemala.

However, as stated earlier, the evangelical church in Central America is now essentially indigenous. Some evangelicals now feel ill at ease with the conservative politics of the 1980s. This has allowed them to focus on apolitical priorities of their faith, personal salvation and personal growth in Christ.⁷⁴

Finally, a 1991 article by the University of Virginia's Amy L. Sherman postulated four ways in which the evangelical "global revolution" could affect consolidation of democracy in Latin America. They are

- 1) Evangelical theology's rejection of modern cultural relativism and support of concepts of absolute truth, universal standards of right and wrong, and a transcendent deity,

⁷¹Coleman, et al, "Protestantism in El Salvador: Conventional Wisdom Versus the Survey Evidence," 140.

⁷²Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* 180.

⁷³Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* 137.

⁷⁴"The Pastor is Faster," *The Economist*, 17 April 1993, 44.

encourage Jeffersonian concepts of inalienable human rights. Such concepts are vital to development of stable democratic traditions.

2) Evangelical theology rejects utopian “heaven on earth” pretensions of liberation theology in that it believes evil is a natural aspect of the human condition and not part of social structures. The “for or against the poor” dichotomy of liberation theology encourages centralized authoritarianism and discourages democratic pluralism.

3) The mere presence of evangelicals in rivalry with the Roman Catholic church creates a condition of religious diversity that is likely to encourage democratic pluralism. Long time democracies like the United States and Great Britain have traditions of religious diversity while nations with single dominate religions such as Spain have historically struggled with democracy.

4) Evangelicals harbor capitalist attributes of economic advancement through asceticism, moral rigor, hard work, responsibility, sobriety, thrift, and belief in Godly favor. This concept of the Weberian Protestant ethic encourages capitalism that, in turn, provides conditions favorable to democracy.⁷⁵

Institutionalization of Central American Evangelical Politics

Despite the economic status or real or perceived conservatism, liberalism, or neutrality of the evangelicals, the sheer growth of evangelical churches means a growing number of evangelical voters. Mirroring the experience in the United States, evangelicals also seem to be in the process of institutionalizing their political influence. Evangelicals appear to be increasing their political participation, nurturing their political sophistication, and improving their political organization.

As mentioned in Chapter One, the *Camino Cristian Nicaraguense (CCN)* made a very respectable showing in Nicaragua’s 1996 elections. This evangelical political party trend is only part of increased involvement by evangelicals in Nicaraguan politics. This increased involvement was not always so.

Nicaraguan Assembly of God Pastor Guillermo Osorno staunchly preached for years in his church and on his radio program that evangelicals should not be politically involved. In 1996, he was CCN’s candidate for president. According to Pastor Osorno, “I abandoned the idea of

⁷⁵Amy L. Sherman, “Evangelicals and the Politics of Latin America,” *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Summer 1991, 23.

politics when I converted to Jesus Christ. Then I realized that the only way our people can change is by putting Jesus Christ in first place politically.” He still says he does not campaign from the pulpit or seek the endorsements of other pastors.⁷⁶

Guatemalan's evangelicals were instrumental in the 1991 election of one of their own, President Serrano Elias. However, support for Serrano crumbled when he later tried to dissolve the National Assembly and the Supreme Court. This apparently embarrassed many Guatemalan

evangelicals who began doubting Serrano’s commitment to Christ along with his ability to govern. Politician Rafael Rottman Chang, an admirer of Serrano, was quick to point out that Serrano made “terrible, terrible mistakes that disappointed and grieved evangelicals in my country tremendously.”⁷⁷

Just prior to the Guatemala’s January 1996 presidential elections, a prominent Roman Catholic church spokesman raised the protest of evangelicals by accusing former evangelical president Efraín Ríos Montt of atrocities during his tenure.⁷⁸ Evangelicals strongly objected to the timing of the church’s accusation. Despite the accusation an evangelical candidate backed by Ríos Montt, Alfonso Portillo, lost the election by only 31,000 votes.⁷⁹

Interestingly, since the 1996 election of President Alvaro Arzú, Guatemalan evangelicals have successfully contended for the support of Arzú’s influential *Primera Dama* Patricia de Arzú. They succeeded in influencing a government youth training program which Mrs. Arzú leads. The program involved optional character building training in the country’s high schools. The evangelicals wanted the program to include elements of Christian moral and ethical teaching.⁸⁰

Evidence also indicates that evangelicals seem to be getting better organized. In a 1992 pan-regional conference in Quito, Ecuador, evangelicals admitted making mistakes in identifying with

⁷⁶Darling, “New Faith for Latin America.”

⁷⁷Rottman Chang, interview by author.

⁷⁸A discussion of Central American evangelical politics would be incomplete without mention of Guatemala’s General Efraín Ríos Montt. Ríos Montt, an evangelical, was the leader of the progressive wing of the Guatemalan military when he ran for president in 1974 against rightist candidate General Kjell Laugerud García. When it appeared Ríos Montt was leading in early election returns, the government suspended the election and declared Laugerud García the winner. However, in 1982, junior military officers seized the government and installed Ríos Montt as president. During his presidency, Ríos Montt was famous for his sermon-like radio addresses which extolled Christian virtue and hard work. But despite his efforts to root out corruption, stabilize the economy and end the country’s guerrilla war, Ríos Montt never did consolidate national support or obtain full control of the military. Army commanders operating with great independence in the country-side continued bloody operations against left-wing insurgents. In August 1983 Ríos Montt himself was deposed by General Oscar Humberto Mejía Victores. Ríos Montt attempted a comeback in the 1990 presidential elections but was eventually barred from running due to technicalities associated with his 1982 seizure of power.

⁷⁹Darling, “New Faith for Latin America.”

⁸⁰“Las Sectas Tras El Poder,” *Revista Cronica*, 22 November 1996, 19.

authoritarian regimes in the past. They acknowledged that “the political field is a legitimate field for the Christian’s action, where the values of justice must be respected and a radical change in our societies must be generated.”⁸¹

Other events point to increased political sophistication on the part of evangelicals. Tom Barry reported that recently established and rapidly growing Pentecostal churches in Honduras have become increasingly aggressively politically. Though politically conservative, the groups have become heavily involved in social assistance programs. Barry also reported that a significant sector of evangelicals is concerned about social justice issues and community-based development programs in addition to traditional soul-saving and discipleship.⁸²

Barry also reported that conservative Pentecostal theology in El Salvador’s burgeoning evangelical churches “mixes easily” with conservative politics but is tempered by growing influence of the country’s mainline Protestant churches. These churches have long emphasized ecumenism and have become involved in refugee assistance and community-organizing.⁸³

In Costa Rica, evangelical churches exert a conservative, pro-US influence in national politics and culture. The conservative trend has led rival Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant churches to adopt Pentecostal-style methods and emotionalism. In the case of Costa Rica, progressive evangelical groups emphasizing ecumenism and social action have had limited success.⁸⁴

In Panama, evangelicals have matured by targeting the country’s large *mestizo* and indigenous Indian populations after years of emphasizing ministry to West Indians and US citizens affiliated with the Panama Canal.⁸⁵

If evangelical growth, political activity, and political maturity continue, the implications of Central American governments influenced by savvy and influential evangelicals are enormous. The next chapter will examine the possible effects of that domination and its ultimate effect on rapidly changing post-Cold War regional security within Central America?

⁸¹ “The Pastor is Faster,” *The Economist*, 42.

⁸² Barry, *Central America Inside Out, The Essential Guide to Its Societies, Politics, and Economics*, 321.

⁸³ Barry, *Central America Inside Out, The Essential Guide to Its Societies, Politics, and Economics*, 190.

⁸⁴ Barry, *Central America Inside Out, The Essential Guide to Its Societies, Politics, and Economics*, 117.

⁸⁵ Barry, *Central America Inside Out, The Essential Guide to Its Societies, Politics, and Economics*, 460.

CHAPTER SIX

EVANGELICAL POLITICAL INFLUENCE: IMPACTS ON REGIONAL SECURITY

Massive Changes and New Challenges

The significant growth of evangelical influence in Central America is but one of many massive changes that have swept the region during the final years of the 20th Century. These sweeping post-Cold War changes are certain to have marked effect on regional security.

If security is defined as the situation in which the vital interests of the regional interests are found safeguarded from substantial interference of the established order, then recent clear trends toward democracy, free markets, and subordination of the military in Central America have furthered this regional security stability.⁸⁶ Degrees of democracy are now present in all the countries and the prognosis for further progress is encouraging. The peaceful and democratic 1996 national elections in Nicaragua and the on-going peace process in Guatemala are but two examples of progress.

Central American governments have vigorously swept out failed statist models of economic development in favor of neoliberal free trade. New opportunities for increased trade, investment, and employment now exist throughout the region.

The historical relationship between the military and the state has also changed dramatically. *Caudilloismo*, once a trademark of Central America society, has been replaced by new relationships in which the militaries, though still prominent, are nonetheless subservient to civil authority. The significant reduction of the size and power of the Salvadoran military demonstrates this trend.

⁸⁶Colegio Interamericano de Defensa, *Manual 2.14, Glosario De Terminos y Siglas*, (Washington, DC: Colegio Interamericano de Defensa, 1996), 22.

With these political, economic, and social changes came new and complex challenges to regional security. According to National Defense University's Ivelaw L. Griffith, these challenges require a "postrealist" approach to conventional thinking concerning security. Postrealists contend those nonmilitary international developments (narcotics trafficking, arms trade, immigration, environmental pollution, AIDS, etc.) can offer very real threats to national sovereignty that nations cannot tackle by themselves. Emerging nonstate actors are plentiful and wield immense power in influencing security and external and internal threats are no longer clearly distinguishable.⁸⁷

Researchers William Perry and Max Primorac enumerated some of these radical new challenges and hazards facing all of Latin America. Those developments included defending tenuous democracies from authoritarian threats, including that from narcotics traffickers, and providing new roles and improving relationships with the nations' militaries.⁸⁸

The changes will require radical shifts from traditional ways of thinking. What might be the role of the evangelicals in the developing political, economic, social, and military responses to these changes? Most importantly, what impact will their influence have on regional security?

Evangelical Contributions to Stable, Free Market, Civilian Democracies

According to noted national security author and newspaper columnist Harry Summers, the greatest need in Latin America today is the encouragement of stable, free market, civilian democracies. In Central America encouraging trends are apparently moving forward but the shadows of destabilizing interests still linger at the edges of the region's "procedural democracies."⁸⁹

As noted in Chapter 5, considerable evidence indicates that a Central American evangelical movement is growing both numerically and in political sophistication. It is likely that a healthy, active evangelical political movement will indeed encourage stable, free market, civilian democracies and thus significantly enhance peace, stability, and security in the region.

Evangelicals will contribute to this security enhancement because of

1) their encouragement of democratic traditions due to their moralistic view of ethical conduct and fair play,

2) their generally free market capitalist economic approach and encouragement of lifestyles marked by morality, hard work, personal responsibility, sobriety, and thrift, and

⁸⁷Ivelaw L. Griffith, *Caribbean Security on the Eve of the 21st Century*, (Washington: National Defense University, 1996), 19.

⁸⁸William Perry and Max Primorac, "The Inter-American Security Agenda," *Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs*, Summer, 1994, 111.

⁸⁹Harry Summers interview by author, Inter-American Defense College, Washington, DC, 29 January 1997.

3) their encouragement of democratic pluralism due to their anti-authoritarian church traditions and their mere presence as a rival to an influential Roman Catholic church.

In discussing evangelical encouragement of democratic tradition, political scientist Robert Bellah remarked, “The millennialism of the American Protestant tradition again and again (has) spawned movements for social change and social reform.”⁹⁰ This evangelical tradition of social improvement will likely encourage permanent democratic traditions in Central America. This is in contrast to a Roman Catholic influence that has historically flitted between support of authoritarian rightist military oligarchies and authoritarian leftist liberation movements. The Roman Catholic Church has also remained divided over recent neoliberal economic reforms.⁹¹ The increased participation and sophistication of evangelicals in clearly democratic political efforts and their acknowledgment of past mistakes in supporting authoritarian regimes point to evangelical desire for genuine democratic reform.

There is little doubt that evangelicals encourage democratic pluralism due to their traditions of loosely structured organization, deliberate factionalization, and eclectic political leanings that, though generally conservative, are difficult to precisely categorize. As is the case with United States democracy, Central American democracy may benefit from healthy pluralistic blend of religious culture in which evangelicals play a significant role.

According to Inter-American Development Bank researchers Jeffrey W. Hayes and Seymour Lipset, “The emphasis on (pluralistic) Americanism as a political ideology has led to a utopian orientation among American liberals and conservatives. Both seek to extend the ‘good society.’ But the religious traditions of Protestant ‘dissent’ have called on Americans to be moralistic, to follow their conscience with an unequivocal emphasis not to be found in countries whose predominant denominations have evolved from state churches.” These dissenters throughout American history mixed religion and politics and pushed forward American political change.⁹² This again is in contrast to the past political influence of a rigidly hierarchically and theologically authoritarian Roman Catholic Church.

In the economic field, evangelicals may have significant impact due to the much maligned but exceptionally persistent concept of the “Protestant ethic.” German sociologist Max Weber, who coined the phrase “Protestant ethic” nearly one hundred years ago, postulated that, secular, *laissez faire*, liberal economic orientations were directly related to Protestant religious tradition. He felt that the rise of European and American capitalism was due to the dominance of Protestantism. Protestants felt “called” to a moral obligation to fulfill individual responsibility in worldly affairs including glorifying God

⁹⁰Robert Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 48.

⁹¹David Schrieberg, “Latin America: Three Years of Quarreling, the Region’s Bishops Attack Liberal Capitalist Policies,” *Christianity Today Magazine*, 31 July 1996.

⁹²Jeffrey W. Hayes and Seymour Lipset, “The Social Roots of United States Protectionism,” published in *Trade Liberalization in the Western Hemisphere*, (Washington: Inter-American Development Bank, 1995), 498.

through individual economic well-being. This was in contrast to the Roman Catholic monastic tradition in which the object was to transcend worldly existence.⁹³

This willingness to become involved in mundane matters and excel in the economic arena has been a trait of Central American evangelicals who emphasize individual responsibility to family, church, community, and nation. This has resulted in an expectation that faithful evangelicals will work hard, provide for their families, remain sober, and consider their economic as well as spiritual future. These firm capitalist qualities among numerically increasing evangelicals can only serve as a foundation for free trade, investment, and economic development. These items are desperately needed in Central America to overcome decades of economic stagnation in a region with enormous economic potential.

Central American evangelicals would probably unanimously agree that the key to meeting Central America's rising security challenges is the notion of imposing moral influence on public policy. Central American evangelicals, like their brethren in the United States, certainly take this notion of moral influence on public policy very seriously. Elder Carlos Velazquez, pastor of one of the largest evangelical churches in Guatemala City, recently said, "I believe that Guatemala will be the first Latin country under the Kingdom of God. Protestants who do not become involved in national affairs should consider that the nation is a reflection of the church. If there is corruption in the nation, it is because there is corruption in the church."⁹⁴

Only time will definitely tell how the growth of Central American evangelicalism and the evangelical influence on politics and regional security will evolve in the years to come. It seems certain their role will be a large one. As Latin American scholar Virginia Garrard-Burnett observed, "Protestantism in Latin America may ultimately be, as the Pentecostals like to say, a 'consuming fire' that forges and purifies--or burns and destroys. In either case it is clear that this Protestant movement is a reformation in the most literal sense of the word: a re-forming of the religious, social, and political contours of contemporary Latin America."⁹⁵

4. ⁹³Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935),

⁹⁴Darling, "New Faith for Latin America."

⁹⁵Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* 208.

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