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Hispanic Evangelicals 2.0

By Sammy Rodríguez

How a new breed of Latino Protestants is changing the face of evangelicalism.

In the historical narrative of the global Hispanic community, the Latino church has just recently experienced its own Protestant Reformation. Although the Roman Catholic Church had prevented for centuries any significant penetration of the Reformation initiated by Martin Luther in the 1500s, the first serious Protestant impact in Latino America has come via the evangelical wing of the church—particularly the Pentecostal movement. But the trajectory of this new reformation is anything but predictable, and, as Dallas pastor David Sandoval predicts, its effects will reverberate within the walls of the church at large.

"Hispanic Evangelicals 1.0, or the first century of Latino evangelicalism, was focused on personal piety and experiential Christianity," he notes. "Hispanic Evangelicals 2.0 will continue to do such, however they will expand their reach to include corporate piety and holiness. We focused for too long on the length of a dress, jewelry, hairstyles and physical appearance—all while our teens were getting pregnant, dropping out of school and totally disconnected from the church. We have, for the most part, emerged out of legalism, yet we are beginning to tackle the true bondages in our community such as sexual immorality, poverty, domestic violence, drug abuse, witchcraft, strife and lukewarmness."

Though Hispanic Evangelicals 1.0 focused on Latinos and Latin America, Hispanic Evangelicals 2.0 are looking beyond the culture and addressing the spiritual and social needs of other cultures and around the world.

"Globalization has hit the Hispanic Evangelical Church. Over 99 percent of our outreach and 99 percent of our giving in the 20th century went to other Latinos," explains David Espinoza, former member of the board of the Assemblies of God Foreign Missions department and a trustee of Global University. "In 2001, for the first time, over 50 percent of all missions giving from Hispanic churches went to such places as Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East."

Hispanics are deliberately focusing on such places as India, Africa and the Middle East. Why? In light of the current geopolitical environment, Latinos are embraced with less trepidation than are North American Anglos.

"Latino missionaries are influencing nations where Anglo Americans can't reach due to media and historical stereotypes. When they see us coming, there is no sense of imperialism, colonialism or a hidden agenda," Espinoza notes. "Although the stereotypes regarding Anglo Americans is incorrect, the Latino church can reconcile perception with reality and bring about the day when those stereotypes are shattered."

How will this new shift in missional focus affect the rest of the church?

"We will see a paradigm shift in what it means to be an evangelical in America through cultural, social, ecclesiastical and political venues," explains Albert Reyes, president of Baptist University of the Americas.

"Hispanics will bring their cultural values to bear on evangelical Christianity with the influence of their collective worldview. Latino evangelical Christians will be more interested in the welfare of the community at large than their own personal welfare. Hispanics will help evangelical congregations gravitate toward a balanced application of the gospel to include issues of social justice and equality for everyone in the community. Social issues will take center stage in congregations because the Scripture bears witness to Jesus' focus on the poor, the prisoner, the blind and the oppressed."

In addition, Reyes believes that Hispanic evangelical Christianity will change the texture of historically white congregations, as they begin to reflect this expanding Hispanic culture and community.

"Worship, discipleship, missions, evangelism, church-planting and so on will have a nuanced Hispanic flavor. Hispanics will take a more active role in the political landscape of our day while respecting the long held value of separation of church and state," he says. "Hispanic evangelicals will find their voice and speak their convictions from a biblical/theological perspective and a Judeo-Christian worldview that is distinctly shaped by Hispanic culture."

Finally, Reyes concluded by prophetically declaring, "As the decibel level of the Hispanic evangelical voice increases, the message will become convincingly clear along the lines of social justice, incarnational approaches to mission, contextually accurate congregational life and political involvement."

At the end of the day, the Latino church may very well be the embodiment of a church that is both purpose- and presence-driven, seeker- and Spirit-driven, prophetic and missional—and above all things, relevant.

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