

The Growing Crisis Behind Brazil's Evangelical Success Story

When Paulo Romeiro wrote *Evangelicals in Crisis* in the mid-1990s, a book that has remained a bestseller among Brazilian evangelicals, he addressed just one of the many ways in which evangelicalism had collapsed in Brazil: its inability to halt the spread of prosperity theology. It is increasingly clear that evangelicals in Brazil are today in the midst of a much larger crisis, starting with the difficulty---not to mention the impossibility---to define what it means to be evangelical.



According to the latest official census, evangelicals represent almost one-quarter of the total population of Brazil (22.5 percent). It is a phenomenal growth, seeing that just 40 years ago they were only 2.5 percent. In spite of their constant official growth, hailed to the world as a success story of missions and evangelism, evangelicals in Brazil face today several challenges. I'll mention a few:

- uncertainty about their own future theological direction
- multiplicity of divergent theologies
- lack of a leadership with moral and spiritual authority
- doctrinal and moral downfall of once-respectable leaders
- rise of totalitarian leaders who call themselves not only pastors but also self-proclaimed bishops and apostles
- gradual conquest of the schools of theology by theological liberalism
- lack of moral standards that can function as a starting point for ecclesiastical discipline
- depreciation of doctrine and exaltation of experience alone

As a result, more Brazilians are looking for churches just to feel good, to seek immediate solutions for their material problems without even reflecting on deeper questions about the existence of eternity, and moving from one community to another without any commitment or engagement in real Christian life and testimony. Incidentally, the number of people who profess to be evangelicals but rarely attend church has grown from 6 percent to 16 percent of all evangelicals in the last few years.

Concurrent Crisis and Success

How did evangelicalism reach this point of success and concurrent crisis in Brazil? Reformation theology and practice has never been fully known or adopted in our country, even among the Reformed churches. As someone said, "Evangelicals in Brazil are amalgamated by a mortar half-Catholic, half-spiritualist, and little or nothing reformed." Besides not having known the doctrines of the Reformation in their fullness and power, other factors seem to have contributed to the current situation:

1. Evangelicals have engaged in dialogue with Catholics, liberals, neo-Pentecostal and other lines without, first, having clearly identified the basic, non-negotiable assumptions. I think we can talk and learn from those who are not Reformed or conservative. However, the dialogue must be pursued within well-defined boundaries and assumptions. Today, evangelicals find it difficult to delineate the boundaries of true Christianity and how to keep the doors closed to heresy.
2. Evangelicals have adopted the non-exclusivity principle. It started with an opening to doctrinal plurality, the multiplicity of ecclesiologies, and moral relativism. Without any effective instrument to at least identify what disagrees with crucial points of the Christian faith, the door was open to false teachers who crept, almost unnoticed, in the historic churches and especially in neo-Pentecostal churches.

3. In order to broaden the base of communion with other lines within Christendom, evangelicals weakened their adherence to the crucial points of historical Christianity. With this progressive reduction of basic doctrinal tenets, the definition of "gospel" has become increasingly broad and lost its original meaning.

4. Historical denominations gradually abandoned the great creeds and confessions of the past that shaped the historical faith of the Church. By disdaining centuries of tradition and theological interpretation, evangelicals found themselves vulnerable to any new interpretation, such as open theism, theology of prosperity, a new perspective on Paul, and so on. But perhaps the worst of these consequences was the loss and absence of the Reformed worldview, which served as the basis for a comprehensive look at the culture, science, and society from the sovereignty of God over all areas of life. Without a comprehensive Reformed worldview, evangelicalism has been limited itself to isolated and fragmented actions in the social and political arena, often without any connection with the Christian worldview, becoming vulnerable to "the ways of the world" in politics and morals.

5. Finally, evangelicals have embarked eagerly in search of academic respectability, not only on the part of other Christians, but especially on the part of the secular academy. As a result, evangelicalism ended up submitting several of its theological institutions to the state's educational standards, which are compromised to worldviews that are methodologically, pedagogically, and philosophically humanistic. This opened the floodgates for the old theological liberalism, which, if moribund abroad, is still alive and kicking in Brazil.

Signs of Hope

There is no easy way out of this crisis. However, there are some encouraging signs of change I cannot leave unmentioned. One of them is the surprising growth of Reformed faith among Pentecostals. There are innumerable examples of Pentecostal pastors turning to the Reformed understanding of Scriptures. Sometimes even entire Pentecostal churches have gone through this change. I quote here an e-mail I received some weeks ago from a former Pentecostal pastor:

Your book *Spiritual Worship* [first published in 1998 and now in its 5th edition] made our whole church stop speaking in tongues and changed our whole liturgy. We even had to change the sign on our building from "Assembly of God" to "Reformed Church." We have become Calvinists within the Pentecostal tradition, a unique movement that has arisen in our day. Because of this bold move on our part, our small church began to grow numerically as never before. The first basic change we made was to create a theological seminary, free, every Tuesday from 20:00 to 22:00. We have students from many denominations: Assembly of God, Foursquare Gospel, and many from neo-Pentecostal, prosperity gospel churches. Our Sunday evening worship is very simple: prayer, worship, preaching of the Word, not to mention the fact that on Tuesday and Friday, because of the great enthusiasm for the Word of God, we are dividing the service into two parts with two messages, and sometimes some brothers stay until five in the morning studying and praying.

I see the historical Christian faith, as manifested in the Protestant Reformation, as a feasible alternative for the evangelical church in Brazil. I recognize that not all the Reformed churches in Brazil have been examples of vitality, relevance, and godly leadership. However, the potential is there. The core to sustain this amazing growth needs not to be sought much further.

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