

PENTECOSTALISM, LATIN AMERICA AND ECO-THEOLOGY:

A Spirit-Baptized Encounter

■ **LUIS ARÁNGUIZ KAHN**

Chilean Pentecostal scholar

■ With Commentary

OSCAR CORVALAN-VASQUEZ, PH.D.

Pentecostal Church of Chile

Secretary of the Pentecostal Latin American Forum


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LUIS ARÁNGUIZ KAHN holds a degree in Spanish Literature and a minor in theology from the Catholic University of Chile, and is currently completing a master's degree in International Studies at the University of Santiago, Chile. He has worked academically in texts and lectures on literature and religion, evangelical analysis of political discourse in Chile and my master's thesis will be in the general field of evangelicals and international politics. Luis comes from a family of traditional Chilean Pentecostalism and was a university leader at a Pentecostal youth group and a preacher at his local congregation.

What would a Pentecostal Latin-American Eco theology look like? In this question I am saying many things simultaneously. First of all, I use the word "Pentecostal." However, there isn't only one Pentecostalism; rather, there are many branches and styles within what is commonly referred to as "Pentecostalism." In this clarification I am compelled to choose one specific branch in the Pentecostal tradition. Secondly, I use the word "Latin-American", which means that I have to take distance from different kinds of Pentecostalism among the world. I have to speak from Global South, to speak considering our regional ecological problems instead of other's concerns. And finally, I use the term "Eco theology". This is a complex word because I have to engage it with my specific Pentecostal view and my Latin-American context. By this way, I will go describing our reality and context in relation with climate change and energy issues, especially related to mining and pollution. Last but not least, I will put in dialogue the result of this question and contextual reflection with the concerns of the common project that convoke us: energy ethics. This reflection intends to call to a stronger Pentecostal action in the field of ecology, looking forward to a church that serves the world as Jesus did.

1 The Pentecostal movements started in the beginning of the twentieth century in many parts of the world. They share not only the conviction of the power of the Holy Spirit pouring among the Church giving many supernatural gifts, but they also share social and material conditions: many of these revivals took part among poor people, peasants or industrial workers. In other words, they started in the middle of the social issues. In the case of Chile, it started mainly in growing cities with increasing immigration from the countryside and consequent formation of poor neighborhoods. In its more than one hundred years, there has been a slow theological development, but development today is urgent. As Pentecostalism is mostly a form of Christianity that emphasizes the spiritual experience with God, especially in the form of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, its theology is not mainly academic or explicit, but practical and implicit. Pentecostal Latin-American (Chilean) eco-theology must be founded at least on two concepts: the experience of the Spirit in the history - specially

evidenced in the contextual aspect of Pentecostal movement – and in the early theological construction of it.

In the beginning, Pentecostals were mostly poor, marginalized people who converted through preaching. But they were also dockworkers, miners or factory workers, which means that they were linked to the big industrial production processes, and therefore, this entails the fact that they were part of the environmental contamination chain, no matter how conscious they were of it. We could say they were just part of a big machine. At that time, Chile was an industrializing economy strong in saltpeter and carbon along the country with the consequent ecological contamination.

We can speak about a *political ecological holiness* that looks toward the Kingdom of God inside a cosmic framework that includes nature.

We can find that in the beginning their theology was focused towards the accomplishment of the great commission of Jesus: to preach the gospel, with an emphasis on the idea of “saving souls” through the power of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This was also accompanied by the radical moral distinction between worldliness and holiness, which drifted the early Pentecostalism to a noted otherworldliness. As Willis Hoover, the Methodist missionary who founded the Pentecostal movement in Chile said: “If we have any reason to be, that reason calls us to a life of separation to preserve what God has entrusted to us,”¹ referring to other churches and the world. If the task of the church is to save souls, then all kinds of concern for environmental matters were to be avoided, as they seem unnecessary and even worldly.

How can we build a Pentecostal Eco theology from these foundations? Here I provide just a few and very limited points to start. In first place, it is necessary to relocate the ecological issues as a theological matter. If God

1 Hoover, W. (Without year) “Ecclesia-Iglesia”. In *Historia del avivamiento pentecostal en Chile*. Santiago: Comunidad Teológica Evangélica de Chile. (Our own translation.)

made all of creation that means it has a deep biblical meaning regarding to its sacred origin. Second, if ecology is not a worldly issue then it is a Christian one. So churches have the challenge to reflect on their duty towards the creation of their God in the same moral way they have concerns about the general human behavior. Finally, the specific Pentecostal emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit to transform reality suggests the task of thinking on how this spiritual outpouring makes us able to work towards ecological concerns. In this sense, Pentecostals, under their particular spiritual strength, can be a relevant agent on these issues; they can redirect their radical morality into ecological matters, also reflecting in their place themselves as part of the big production industrial machine. Our commitment to transform the world through the message of sanctification must now include a radical morality focused on fighting against everything that breaks the holiness of creation like idolatry of exploitative commerce and indiscriminate pollute emissions of the industrial machine.

2 In Latin America there have been some developments on Eco theology that come from other traditions. I cannot speak theologically from Latin America without mentioning one of the main Latin-American theological frames, Liberation Theology.² In a Pentecostal view, we could say that Pentecostals were worried about “spiritual issues” while liberationists were worried about “worldly issues”. However, I would like to go beyond this distinction because it is not that liberationist Christians were not worried about spiritual issues but that they understood spirituality in other terms. And it is not that Pentecostals were not interested in worldly issues, but that they understood worldliness in other terms.

I would like to take two concepts from liberation theology. The first comes from the hand of Leonardo Boff; in his book *Ecología: Grito de la tierra, grito de los pobres*³, the Brazilian theologian develops a critical analysis of technological human progress. In his view, modern civilization is oriented by an

2 In few words, it is necessary to say that in the Latin-American context these two groups have been mainly opposed to each other. During the XX century, Pentecostalism has been mainly politically conservative; meanwhile liberationist Christians has been always linked to the left. This political difference is relevant considering that this has had concrete results in the reality of Latin-American countries.

3 Boff, L. (1996). *Ecología: grito de la tierra, grito de los pobres*. Madrid: Trotta.

anthropocentric (then androcentric) concept that divides human being and cosmos, and therefore, technological progress concludes as domination over nature. This can be seen clearly in the various forms of natural exploitation in the region, especially those regarding mining, water and forests.⁴ The call of Boff is to rethink our cosmology, so we can better savor the greatness and glory of God in his creation. The second concept that is important to consider is *political holiness*, taken from the Spanish theologian Jon Sobrino⁵. According to his way of thinking, liberation is not only a practice, but also spirituality. In his context, this utterance is relevant, especially considering the idea that spirituality was not related to material reality, and therefore, relegated to second place. Against this notion, Sobrino claims that holiness calls believers to the political field as agents of the Kingdom of God and its justice over the oppressed. Although this can be applied mainly for the poor, Sobrino's point of view can also be applied to ecology. Then, we can speak about a sort of *political ecological holiness* that looks toward the Kingdom of God inside a cosmic framework that includes nature.

The spirit-baptized Pentecostal Latin-American believer can no longer continue living without paying attention to big conflicts we are facing as region regarding to ecological matters.

This concept of spirituality, regarded not only as something far from reality, but as part of it, opens a new way to think on Pentecostal spirituality from a Latin-American perspective. Even though Pentecostals usually don't see the political factor in their thinking, the fact is that there is one. So, if we

4 Kamilia Lahrichi, "Chile's Pollution Grows in Scramble to Meet China's Copper Demand," *China Dialogue*, August 28, 2014. Retrieved from <https://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/7262-Chile-s-pollution-grows-in-scramble-to-meet-China-s-copper-demand> "Mining and Logging Companies 'leaving all of Chile without water,'" *The Guardian*, April 24, 2013 <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/apr/24/mining-logging-chile-without-water>

5 Sobrino, J. (1985). *Liberación con Espíritu*. Santander: Sal Terrae.

try to establish a dialogue between the Pentecostal beginning experience plus its strong moral implicit theology, and the insight of political holiness plus the notion of a sacred creation, we could glimpse a Pentecostalism that is capable of increasing its moral strength, renewing its origins and finding partnership with ecological matters.

3 My third and last step is the thought of Aaron Jason Swoboda⁶, North-American Pentecostal theologian. He begins to notice the fact that Pentecostal academy, churches and publications have been "Eco-theologically quiet" (101).⁷ However, he finds that there are four major strands that have contributed to a social Pentecostal theology: charismatic social theology, liberation theologies, eschatological social justice and African creation spiritualities. As we have chosen liberation theologies as a source, we will continue with the concept from which Swoboda has articulated his Pentecostal Eco theology: *Spirit-baptized creation*.

Swoboda's account is relevant for us in two senses. First, he maintains the idea of creation—earth—as the residence of the Spirit, as the Spirit "fills all things" (Eph. 4:10). Second, he maintains the idea that a person baptized in the Holy Spirit is empowered to "care for, protect and defend the earth" (285). In his perspective, as in the beginning, the baptism in the Holy Spirit was a way for bringing peace among all races, according to the view of black leader of Azusa Street revival William Seymour: the core of the action of the Spirit is love. Being so, the Baptism of the Holy Spirit and an understanding of creation as a sacred work of God, would bring out a love for creation, and consequently, an ecological ethic.

The idea that the Spirit is present in all creation is the basis to understand a spirit-baptized creation the same way spirit-baptized believer, in which God is present in the same way in both. Creation then is seen as a sacred domain. Although a believer baptized in the Holy Spirit could think that through this empowerment he goes outside of the world, the goal here is to note that, precisely because of the baptism, he acquires a new perspective on

6 Swoboda, A.J. (2011) *Tongues and Trees: Towards a Green Pentecostal Pneumatology*. Thesis for Ph.D. on Philosophy, University of Birmingham.

7 He also notes the deep differences among liberation theology and Pentecostalism.

his role regarding creation.

How to receive this notion in Latin-American Pentecostalism? As Swoboda looked back to Seymour, we have done the same with Hoover. But also, we should be committed to looking forward toward foreign theological developments. The spirit-baptized Pentecostal Latin-American believer can no longer continue living without paying attention to big conflicts we are facing as region regarding to ecological matters. We also need to understand our place not only as a political agent, but as an Eco political agent. And as Latin-Americans that have come from poverty and marginalization, we must go deeper in our roots, understanding the consequences of being citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven and of a colonized region. As church, as Christians seeking political ecological holiness in the power of the Spirit, we must rise our voices against those who day by day destroy the creation of God through unethical exploitation of natural resources. We also have the opportunity to make efforts looking for the construction of better communities, protect the exploited people and indigenous communities.

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4 Finally, some conclusions and concerns. Pentecostals have notably matured since they began. They have the potential to do great things in societies. If they become aware and reflect more on ecological matters, they could be a strong agent of influence and change. This is a long process that has already begun. What would happen if we mix radical morality, poverty and exploitation experience, political holiness, ecological concern, and spirit-baptized human strength focused on the problem of

creation as a spirit-baptized one?

Let's see some aspects in which this possible new Pentecostal Latin-American Eco theology ethics could engage. Some global ecological issues we can name are, for instance, carbon dioxide emissions, creating a renewable energy future and the social cost of energy. In the first place, Pentecostals can do a great influence calling for carbon equity policies by requesting the creation of jobs while demanding a decrease in the impact of air pollution, an improvement in economic conditions and climate resiliency for the poor. The most polluted cities in the region like Bogotá, Lima, Santiago, Montevideo and Cochabamba, are part of countries with a strong Pentecostal presence and big national churches must take part in this discussion to work on fighting against pollution.

In another way, if Pentecostals develop a larger and stronger reflection about ecology, would it be possible for them to discuss to invest 5% of their investments into climate solutions to end energy poverty with clean energy? It is one of the most important questions regarding the economic power that different Pentecostal denominations have reached. In the present, Pentecostals are near to 13% of total population (560 million people) in Latin America. In all countries it is possible to find big national churches that are economically strong. If leadership of these organizations assumes a commitment with energy ethics, they not only could mobilize thousands and thousands of believers but a lot of economic resources to work in climate solutions and clean energy.

Pentecostal churches could support the 1.5°C temperature rise limit endorsed by the Paris Agreement and be not only advocates, but a group that pleads for the establishment of fossil fuel industry liability for climate impacts, creating funds to support adaptation in vulnerable regions. This is a fundamental engagement in which they can start to work to reduce climate impacts in the region and in their particular countries.

Latin America is a big territory, composed by many countries with different energy concerns. However, there are some common problems that can no longer wait and that deserve urgent attention from Pentecostal communities as part of their societies. We have above 100 million Latin-Americans without access to electric energy. In times of regional drought

many hydroelectric plants have to severely rationing their water reserves. These and other problems are a signal for a need of regional planning. One of the main reasons that block this is the deregulation. What can Pentecostals and Pentecostal churches do about it?

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Churches and believers are not only people with beliefs, they are also citizens, and they inhabit a territory, a country. They are part not only of a region, but part of a society. In this sense, here is a need of summing forces; Pentecostals have an historical opportunity to be part of this. Even though some may not have economic power, they can influence political matters to foster their States support of an international agreement. Pentecostal faith, as we have seen through this brief text, can be a strong theological frame to encourage changes in this context through an active political ecological holiness.

These, among many others, are concrete issues which Pentecostal believers and churches could start to think about from a Pentecostal Latin-American Eco theology ethic. If it has not happened before, perhaps it is precisely the time in which Pentecostals can start to go deeper, not only in their theology itself, but in engaging it with the urgent problems in our societies. And what better than doing so starting from and going with the Holy Spirit's strength? This is the time: this is a call. This is a commitment from God to his church; from the Holy Spirit to the believers. It is time for Pentecostals to assume that the Spirit that lives in their hearts also lives in the creation of God, and it is a historical time to fight for it. This is the time for an ecological political holiness Pentecostal revival.

ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS:

A Pentecostal Energy Analysis

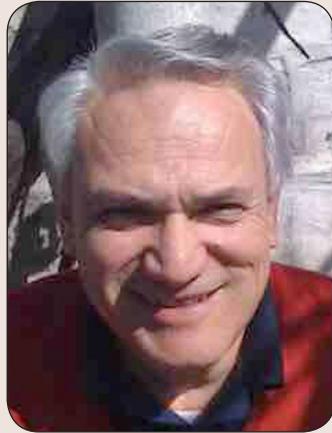
■ **OSCAR CORVALAN-VASQUEZ, PH.D.**

Pentecostal Church of Chile

Secretary of the Pentecostal Latin American Forum



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OSCAR CORVALAN-VASQUEZ, PH.D.,

(Toronto) Pentecostal Church of Chile, is present secretary of the Pentecostal Latin American Forum (sponsored by the Global Christian Forum). He is the ecumenical officer of the Pentecostal Church of Chile, which has been a member of the WCC since 1964 and has a partnership with the United Church and USA Disciples of Christ for several decades. Thanks to that partnership, his church has developed a 100 hectares territory in the Andean mountains to provide ecological education to children, young people and pastors.

As a sociologist interested in the development of the Pentecostal movement in Chile and Latin America, I would like to make a few remarks regarding its relation with ecological matters in general and the use of energy in particular. First of all, it is necessary to recall that over most of the twenty century Pentecostal churches' members were found among the poorest of the poor in Chile. The entire Pentecostal movement may be read as a social protest movement in a catholic, landowners and mining elite dominated country until the 1960s. Catholicism was hegemonic until Pentecostals were revealed to be over 10 percent of the population and definitely their level of recognition changed when during the present century when they reached nearly 20 percent of the population. It is only now that they can think about the use of energy and water at different levels of the country. Their consumption of energy has been very low following their access to a very low portion of the national income. In addition, while Pentecostals worked as peasants before the agrarian reform of the 1960s their energy consumption was also very low. The Pentecostal presence among the mining workers in the north of the country was also very low. Industrial workers also were less than 20 per cent of the labor force during the last century and probably a lower percentage among them were Pentecostals. Therefore, Pentecostals in Chile cannot be characterized as important energy consumers or linked to production with high energy consumption levels.

Nonetheless, it is true that for Pentecostals God created nature and all forms of life, which should be preserved and take care of it, including water and energy wise consumption. It should be remembered that Chile has very few sources of oil production and that most of electricity is produced using coal and water resources. It also has the most expensive electricity cost per kilowatt in Latin American, which makes difficult for Pentecostals to be high consumers given the relatively low income distribution they have access to.

It should also be remembered that since colonial times, Chile, as well as several Latin American countries, exploited their mining resources to be exported abroad and have the capacity for importing industrial products. In the beginning of the country history mining was organized to obtain and

export gold, silver and saltpeter. Today copper is exported to China, Europe and North America. Oil, carbon and electrical energy to move mining production is probably the bigger portion of energy consumption but it is so for export and not for national consumption. This is a serious obstacle to reducing the total cost of energy consumption and unfortunately Pentecostals have little to say in this regard. Given Chile's role as a raw material producer in the international markets it is not easy to reduce energy consumption until the industrialized countries reduce their high levels of industrial products consumption.

A major conscientization process about the need to control the globe temperature increase is needed, as part of our responsibility to take care of God's created nature.

Within such a socioeconomic context Pentecostals still are increasingly becoming aware of ecological matters. For instance, the Pentecostal church of Chile has a hundred hectare center in the cordillera of the Maule Region to train children and young people on ecological matters and the importance of taking care of nature created by God. But is also true that a stronger voice is needed for reducing pollution caused by heating with wood or fossil based energy. In addition, a major conscientization process about the need to control the globe temperature increase is needed, as part of our responsibility to take care of God's created nature.

In the case of Chile, energy consumption issues are also linked to water consumption, since the country has 4,200 kilometers of continental coast and the northern half increasingly will need energy to separating salt from ocean water to be used both for human and productive use. Today, climate changes have produced melting down of frozen mountains in the very south as well as displacement of rain from the central to the south regions of the country. Since two thirds of the country's population is located in the

central and north regions, water consumption is increasingly an issue for which solution is not foreseen. So, being Pentecostals nearly a fourth part of the population, it does make sense to increasingly adopt a living style consistent with a logical approach to eco theology.

Finally, it is possible to develop a theological approach on energy consumption among Pentecostals given their historical ascetic approach to life, probably inherited from Protestantism. The usual approach to the community life of Pentecostals consists of seeking the welfare of their family, a new ethic to relate men and women which controls machismo and respects women, a wise use of the economic income for educating their children, a friendly attitude with neighbors and co-workers, as well as an attitude that believe that we all are subject to the final and just judgement of the Lord Jesus.



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