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**EVANGELICAL CHURCHES IN A TEGUCIGALPA
BARRIO, DO THEY FIT THE ESCAPIST
AND LEGALISTIC STEREOTYPE?:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC INVESTIGATION**

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of an ethnographic study done in evangelical churches in a Tegucigalpa, Honduras neighborhood in 1994. The study had two main objectives. One was to observe church members' attitudes and actions toward social action and responding to the physical needs of those living in the neighborhood. The results show that although in many ways the church members fit the escapist stereotype, their actions and attitudes are not easily explained by one general evangelical ideology. The second aim of the project was to come to a better understanding of the strict legalism present in these churches. The goal was not to evaluate the outward behavioral changes the rules produce; but to focus on how the rules are communicated, and how this legalism affects the nature of the church. This paper does not challenge those who point to the rules' positive concrete results, such as less drinking; but it draws attention to a number of less positive aspects of this legalism.

This report begins with a history of Las Mesetas and a description of the ten evangelical churches in Las Mesetas. The main body of the paper contains two parts. The first explores evangelical involvement with the physical needs of the community, and the second focuses on church rules and membership requirements that illuminate the evangelical worldview.

LAS MESETAS

Tegucigalpa's population more than doubled in the 1980's. Las Mesetas was one of the many *colonias* that sprung up on the hills around the city in that time. In contrast to the large planned housing projects developed by investors or the government, the majority of the *colonias*, like Las Mesetas, were invasions³ or squatter communities.

In February, 1979, a group of people first laid claim to this area of unused land by building simple, one-room dwellings with whatever materials they could obtain. Others quickly followed. The community then organized, laid out streets, lots, and a soccer field. During a three year period there was a high level of activity as individuals sought to obtain lots, and then collectively sought to legally establish the ownership of the land. At times the situation in Las Mesetas bordered on anarchy. Certain corrupt community leaders, for example, swindled many people who had made payments to these leaders thinking they were establishing legal possession of a plot of land.

Although on the level of the whole *colonia* the issue of land ownership has not been resolved, internally, the situation has remained calm since 1983.⁴ Since that time residents have shown much less

³ Leaders of popular movements call these actions *recuperaciones*. The general population, however, continues to more commonly use the vocabulary of the land owners. Therefore I will use the more common term.

⁴ A survey representing data collected from 325 of the 2033 families that lived in Las Mesetas in 1991, shows that home ownership in Las Mesetas is high in the sense that only 5.2% of the people rent their homes, but only 18.4% had paid or were paying for their homes in 1991. Although the rest of the people surveyed stated a willingness to pay for their land at some point, more than one-half of these people did not know who they were going to pay. The rest planned to pay the Municipality. Only 2.6% had paid or were paying the Zuniga family who claim title to the land. (These statistics, and all others quoted in this section are from: Joel Diringer, JD, MPH, "Report on the Survey of Colonia [Las Mesetas] Tegucigalpa, Honduras, C.A." November, 1991.)

interest in community meetings and organizing for the collective benefit of the community. The local leadership has been more stable, but not as strong as it had been before 1983.⁵

Since 1983 the community has organized to bring in electricity. There also were attempts to establish a water project, but they ended when certain leaders embezzled the money residents had paid toward the project. Because of this, although 92% of the people considered a better water supply the greatest need in Las Mesetas, it has been very difficult to get people to contribute to a fund for a water project. The community finally circumvented this problem in 1993 by forming an independent water project committee and intentionally seeking a religious leader to be the treasurer (the pastor of Gracia y Poder, an evangelical church). With additional support from the national government and a foreign aid organization, the vast majority of homes now have running water.⁶

After the recent outbreak of cholera in Latin America the government health department sponsored a massive latrine-building campaign. In 1985, before this campaign, 21% of the households had no toilet facilities. At the end of 1991 that number had dropped to 3.4%.⁷ Sanitation, however, is still a grave problem. There is no sewage system, so all waste water runs down the dirt streets to the river. The latrines, although an improvement, are not a solution. Las Mesetas is built on rocky ground. Waste from the latrines seeps through cracks in the rocks, draining out onto the property of those who live at lower elevations.

Like the vast majority of people in Honduras, economic struggles are a part of life for most residents of Las Mesetas. Twenty-five percent of the households are headed by single mothers. Sixty-two

⁵ Although one could perhaps find in Las Mesetas evidence of the "post-ideological" moment that some see in Latin America, this specific lack of activism does not apparently support that theory. Rather people apparently lost interest in community organization once they felt secure about their land.

⁶ In 1985, 75.6% of the people bought their water from vendors in trucks (much more expensive than the monthly bill of those elsewhere in the city who have water from the public water company via pipes.) After 1985 public water faucets were installed. In 1991, 86% of the people depended on public faucets for their water, but more than half of them had to go more than 100 meters to get to a faucet.

⁷ In 1991 4.6% of the households had toilets, 92% had latrines.

percent of the households earned less than \$185 a month. In 1991 only two thirds of the heads of households had stable work. Only 8% of the residents believe their life conditions had improved from 1989-1991, and more than 80% said conditions had gotten worse.

As is common in "invasion" neighborhoods, some have achieved moderate financial success and have built brick homes. Many, however, still live in shacks. In 1985, 46% of the houses had dirt floors. By 1991, 23.4% still had dirt floors. Sixty-two percent of the houses had wood walls in 1991, and 4.9% still had roofs put together from scraps. Twenty percent of the houses had only one room; 31.7% had two rooms.

Lack of education continues to be a problem in Las Mesetas. Only 29% of the people have finished grade school,⁸ and the percentage of teenagers who have not completed grade school is almost as high as the percentage of those 35-55 years old who have not completed grade school. Violence, drugs, and delinquency are growing problems in Las Mesetas. One-quarter of the people view illegal drugs as the greatest threat to the health and safety of their children (50% said illnesses). When there is no electricity at night,⁹ most people shut themselves in their homes while gangs roam the streets.

The Evangelical Church in Las Mesetas¹⁰

All but one of the ten evangelical churches in Las Mesetas, La Mizpa, are pentecostal. The Iglesia Amor Fe y Vida is decidedly less pentecostal than the others, but still retains some pentecostal characteristics. The other eight churches are pentecostal in their style of worship, clapping and raising their arms as they sing, and in practicing the gifts of the Holy Spirit: speaking in tongues, healing, and

⁸ 16% finished grade school; 7% completed part of their secondary education; 7% completed high school; and 2% have gone beyond high school.

⁹ Occasional loss of electric power has been a way of life in Honduras. In 1994, however, there were severe electrical shortages. For much of the year the electrical company rationed power, giving customers only 12 hours or less of electricity.

¹⁰ Besides the ten evangelical churches there is also one Roman Catholic Church and one Mormon Church in Las Mesetas.

prophecy.

Two of the churches belong to large international denominations. La Mizpa is part of the Central American Mission denomination of churches. The Central American Mission is not linked with any one denomination in the United States, but draws missionaries and financial support from a variety of conservative dispensational churches in the United States. The Honduran churches started by this mission agency now make up a self-governing national denomination. The mission agency does, however, continue to cooperate with the church. The Iglesia de Dios de la Profecía belongs to The Church of God of Prophecy centered in Cleveland, Tennessee. The Las Mesetas church gives out a pamphlet of their foundational doctrines, "29 Important Biblical Truths." The tract comes from the U. S. headquarters and is a translation of the English version.¹¹ (People from neither of these two churches, however, made any mention of North American missionaries starting or having any leadership roles with the Las Mesetas churches. That was the case in all the other churches as well).

Two other churches belong to denominations with international ties: the Pentecostal Movement International and Principe de Paz. Principe de Paz has a strong national structure that provides the written rules of the church and also determines who will pastor individual churches. Although members reported some connection with a U. S. mission agency, this was not as significant a part of their identity as in the above two churches.

One other church, Hermanos en Cristo, had loose ties with a U. S. mission agency (Brethren in Christ), but broke off the relationship a few years after it affiliated with this mission. This break was not caused by conflict over beliefs, but over administrative practices of the national representative of the

¹¹ As one example of how these truths are transplanted in a literal fashion, a woman told me that people from her church could not participate in something like the *patronato* because they could not be in *logias*. That was a new word for me. When I asked her to explain, it became evident that she was not sure what the word "*logias*" meant either. She did know, however, that it meant church members could not serve in the local council. In reality, what the church in its U.S. context had prohibited was membership in lodges and secret societies.

mission (a Honduran). The Hermanos en Cristo church in Las Mesetas is the mother church of a few other churches that separated with it.¹²

The other churches in Las Mesetas are independent in the sense that they do not belong to a denomination.¹³ A number of them do, however, have affiliations with other churches in Honduras, often because they were started by or had helped to start another church.¹⁴

PART I

EVANGELICAL CHURCHES AND THE PROBLEMS AND NEEDS OF LAS MESETAS

INTRODUCTION

A common, if simplistic, characterization of Latin American pentecostals is that they preach a gospel of escapism. They respond to the problems of poverty and injustice by promising a better life to come in heaven. The message commonly preached by evangelists in parks, buses, and in the churches centers on the individual's need to insure he or she will go to heaven. This supports the notion of escape, as does the image of people going to church every night singing and praying with great cathartic emotion.

Many lay people and church leaders who advance this escapist view of pentecostals as escapists will explain that pentecostals view the world as evil and, hence, preach against involvement in the world. One imagines a group of believers closed up in their own circle—apolitical, yet supporting the status quo through inaction.¹⁵

¹² These daughter churches are located an hour or two from Tegucigalpa.

¹³ They are: Centro Cristiano Gracia y Poder, Pentecostal, and Mi Rey de Paz. Another church, called Movimiento Misionero, had just started in 1994 (in the same building of a church that disintegrated).

¹⁴ Those who support a conspiracy theory for explaining the growth of evangelicalism in Latin America emphasize ties to the United States. But even this brief survey challenges that theory. It shows that there is not a direct, monolithic North American influence in the evangelical movement in Las Mesetas. To say that, however, is not to discount the importance of the *indirect* influence in a number of churches.

¹⁵ In Honduras both critically thinking Catholics and more progressive evangelicals often caricature pentecostals in this way. Most non-pentecostal evangelicals, however, would fit into, and are placed into,

These observations are usually based on only superficial observation. But the earliest in-depth studies by a scholar characterized pentecostals in similar ways. Christian Lalive d'Epina (1960) used what Daniel Levine calls the "crisis/solace" model, which presents pentecostalism as a form of escapism.¹⁶ Lalive d'Epina carefully documented the negative attitude of pastors toward political involvement. In a recent book, however, John Burdick challenges researchers not just to pay attention to the official church doctrines and listen to pastors explain what their churches believe, but also to observe the actions of ordinary people in particular communities.¹⁷ With this in mind, I attempted in this research not only to observe the ideology of the evangelical churches in Las Mesetas, but also their actions.

My research highlights the difficulty of making generalizations about evangelicals and their attitudes and actions regarding problems and needs in their community. Two points stand out. First, I encountered apparent contradictions between ideology and action, as well as conflicting ideologies, both within entire churches, and in individuals. Second, one church in Las Mesetas has adopted an explicitly atypical attitude toward social involvement. Their experience raises a number of theoretically important questions.

EVANGELICALS IN LAS MESETAS: DO THEY FIT THE STEREOTYPE?

Why Are There Problems? What Is The Church's Role In Solving Them?

Murl Dirksen and Karen Carroll Mundy present a theoretical model for interpreting pentecostals' attitude toward social justice, based on the view that pentecostals tend toward a personalistic view of the world:

the same caricature.

¹⁶ David Stoll, "Introduction," in Rethinking Protestantism in Latin America eds. Virginia Garrard-Burnett & David Stoll, (Philadelphia: Temple Univ., 1993) 6-7.

¹⁷ John Burdick, Looking For God in Brazil, (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993).

Social injustice can be explained as being due to the active, deliberate intervention of an agent. This agent can be human (a bad individual), a non-human (sin, evil spirit), or a supernatural being (Holy Spirit, God, angels, devil). Evil forces and bad people cause financial, marital, and interpersonal problems.

A naturalistic view, on the other hand, regards social injustice as originating in social conditions that cause an imbalance in the societal order. In the naturalistic view, social injustice is related to structural elements within the social organization.¹⁸

Those with a stronger naturalistic view see the need to work at improving organizational structures and social conditions. Those with a stronger personalistic view see the need to change individuals who are the cause of problems, or will conceive the problem as a battle of spiritual powers. For example, the personalistic solution for a wife suffering physical abuse is to convert her husband so he will change his behavior. Those with a naturalistic view would develop educational and counseling programs aimed at prevention and helping people in this situation. They would see the problem as related to broader economic and social issues and work for structural change.

In an attempt to evaluate how well the evangelicals in Las Mesetas fit this typology, I asked the following questions: "What are your greatest struggles and challenges right now? What are the biggest and most urgent problems for Las Mesetas?" Then, I repeated their responses and asked, "Why is it like this?" Finally, I asked questions about how their churches are responding to these situations.

There was general agreement among those interviewed about the problems in Las Mesetas. They typically mentioned gangs, drug abuse, unemployment, general economic difficulties, lack of proper sewage, too many single mothers, and crime. They gave a variety of explanations for this reality in Las Mesetas, and answers to what the church should do. Stereotypical answers offered by one woman accentuate the divergences in the responses of others.

This woman offered two reasons for the situation in Las Mesetas: "These things are happening

¹⁸ Murl O. Dirksen & Karen Carroll Mundy, "Social Justice and Evangelism: A Pentecostal Perspective," paper presented at the International Roman Catholic--Pentecostal Dialogue, Paris, France, July 1993, 11-12. I aim to evaluate the consistency of evangelicals in regards to this typology, to show movement within the evangelical community in relation to this typology.

because the Bible said they would ("*cumpliendo la Escritura*"); and because the people in Las Mesetas do not want to seek God." She stated that, "God is the solution to these problems, and the church's role is to do evangelism—going to groups of young people that are involved with gangs." She does not think Christians should be involved in the *patronato*,¹⁹ trade unions, or political parties, but she does think it would be appropriate to be in a community group that sought to improve life in Las Mesetas. (An active female member of Iglesia de Dios de la Profecía.)

Another woman's answers were almost identical to the woman above. She simply adds this detail, "If people would seek God, then they would be able to spend money on their children instead of on drugs." When it came to actual involvement in the community, however, this woman was much more positive. She stated, "It would be good for a Christian to be in the *patronato*." She personally had been involved in a cooperative and served on a community health committee. (An active female member of Hermanos en Cristo.)

One might expect a pastor to expound the "party line" and perhaps find laity who stray from it. Thus, the answers of the pastor of the Hermanos en Cristo Church are surprising. His answers differ significantly from the above member of his church. The pastor explained that many of the community problems are due to poor administration and corrupt local leaders. His church takes an active role in seeking to help meet the needs of its members.²⁰ The church has also worked with the Amor Fe y Vida church to build houses for needy residents of Las Mesetas (including some non-evangelicals). The pastor is trying to convince other churches to work with him to set up a small school that would train Las Mesetas youths in carpentry and mechanical skills. Although, in many ways, his answers still reflect a personalistic mentality they do not simply remain at a spiritual level.

¹⁹ The *patronato* is the official community council. It is a board elected by the people of Las Mesetas.

²⁰ For example, a church member reported that the pastor had helped her husband get work, and the church had helped them build their house—giving physical and financial help. Also in times of extreme need, the church helped them financially and gave them food.

When I asked the pastor of the Central American Church, La Mizpa, why life is as it is in Las Mesetas, he responded that the reasons are profound. "It is because of the system in which we live, put in place by humans." He made a number of critical comments about Honduran politicians and then said that according to Deuteronomy, chapter 28, there is lack of blessings in Honduras because there is a lack of obedience. He went on to say, "They tell us that Honduras is an independent and sovereign country. It is not." Yet, after making this statement that would please any Honduran leftist, this pastor said that the solution was to pray to God. "The solution is not one political party or the other." He views the church's specific role as praying for the leaders and seeking to change individuals.

In this pastor's thinking we note an interesting mixture of Dirksen's and Mundy's categories. This mix is evident in his life as well. Although those who attend his church report that he does not preach about injustices in the community, he was one of the founding members of the Las Mesetas health committee—an independent community movement that seeks neighborhood improvement.

One female member of Amor Fe y Vida church gave more naturalistic answers. She commented that my question is a difficult one, and then stated that there is more crime because the economy is worse. There are problems with gangs because of the poor state of the family and because people need a place to feel they belong. She sees a great lack of education and training among the people in Las Mesetas. It is noteworthy, however, that when she talked about starting a center for counseling and educating families, she emphasized that it must include a spiritual dimension and that it would be very good for churches to cooperate with the center. As one would expect, she thinks it would be good for a Christian to be involved in a trade union, the *patronato*, and community organizations. But contrary to what you would expect of a typical naturalistic view, she had reservations about Christians becoming involved with political parties, primarily because they are so corrupt. Looking at how others responded to this issue of involvement in political parties and community organizations relates to our question of whether the evangelicals in Las Mesetas fit the escapist stereotype.

Participation In The World

The stereotype of evangelicals is that their leaders prohibit them from involvement with "the world" so that they will not be contaminated by it. To attempt to discover at what level this attitude is present in Las Mesetas, I asked people if it would be good, neutral, or bad for a Christian to be involved in six organizations: *patronato*, trade unions, political parties, sports teams, environmental organizations, and community groups. People answered as follows:

	good	neutral	bad
<i>Patronato</i> -	8	1	1
Trade union -	4	4	2
Political party -	1	4	5
Sports team -	5	5	0
Ecological organization -	10	0	0
Community group -	10	0	0

The sense of taboo and isolationism was evident in the woman from Iglesia de Dios de la Profecía quoted above. She gave the most negative answers, but lacked good reasons for them. Interestingly, however, even she said it would be good for a Christian to be involved in an ecological organization or a community group. Logically we would expect her to respond negatively to these organizations as well. Her surprising positive answers combined with her inability to explain her negative answers demonstrates that at least some evangelicals have a negative attitude about certain organizations, not because they have personally reflected, but because they have been told these groups are bad. In general, the responses show that evangelicals in Las Mesetas do not simply carry a comprehensively negative attitude toward all types of involvement with secular organizations.

It is clear that the strong negative attitude toward political parties did not stem from a knee-jerk reaction against all involvement in the world, but from cynicism about political parties specifically. Respondents spoke about the corruption of the parties and the deep-seated dishonesty inherent in them. One stated, "They are not oriented to give that which they promise they will give." The explanations are

personalistic and spiritual in the sense that they demonstrate a concern for the individual morality of the potential Christian politician. (Many think it would be impossible to be serious member of a political party in Honduras and maintain Christian behavior.) Their negative responses, however, do not demonstrate an attitude of: "No, we do not care about these earthly issues because we are just waiting to go to heaven."

Individualistic Or Communitarian?

At the level of ideology and theology most evangelicals in Las Mesetas are individualistic. For instance, when they finished the sentence: "A Christian is someone who . . .," only two of the respondents used words that implied that a central part of being a Christian is belonging to a community. And even what these two said could be interpreted individualistically.²¹ There is a strong emphasis on going to church meetings, a community activity, but the rationale is usually individualistic: it is important to go to church so that one does not become cold (*enfriarse*) and lose his or her faith. As we will see in part II, the rules are individualistic both in the sense that they focus on individual behavior and that it is up to the individual to comply with them.

In spite of this, there is strong evidence of community in the churches in Las Mesetas. People are motivated to obey the rules because they want to belong to a group. The divisions between churches, and between evangelicals and non-evangelicals foster a sense of community identity. Even if members do not go to church every night for the purpose of fostering community, some community building does happen nonetheless. Friendships do develop. Although there are examples of relative indifference to the needs of people within the church, there are also examples where it is clear that believers have a sense of

²¹ Both these people included in their answer the phrase, "A Christian is someone who congregates" (*que congrega*). That obviously implies a group of people, but the emphasis here may be on the individual's responsibility to go to the meeting. An answer such as: "A Christian is someone who is part of a group of people who . . .," would more explicitly demonstrate a concept of community as integral to what it means to be a Christian.

responsibility to help each other.

Conclusion

Although the evangelicals in Las Mesetas have inherited an ideology that is individualistic, spiritual, and in many senses escapist, they also show evidences, in varying degrees, of thinking and acting independently within that ideology. Even while hoping for a better heavenly future, they also demonstrated a clear sense of the need to survive today. Survival is not an easy matter in Las Mesetas, and because of that the ideology does not always survive the needs of the moment.²²

At the same time, although active in meeting physical needs, and even having some analysis of structural injustice, most church members are a long way from a naturalistic approach as described above. In reality, most evangelicals in Las Mesetas remain, to a great degree, escapists. In practice they are escapists to a great degree simply because they have to go to church six or seven times a week.²³ As one frustrated community leader told me, "It seems evangelicals never have time to be involved in community projects. It seems they separate themselves from the body and only worry about the soul. We need to save both soul and body."²⁴

Evangelicals are material beings, and they applaud actions taken to strengthen the body as well as the soul. They agree it is good to work to improve Las Mesetas and help those with physical needs. Very few, however, see this as an integral part of the Christian faith.²⁵ As Plutarco Bonilla writes, social

²² For example the pastor who served as treasurer on the water project committee (page 3), preached that we are in the last days, but still has concern for today. So, besides his involvement on the committee, his church gives scholarships and sponsors medical brigades.

²³ Lack of involvement in community projects, however, may not just be a time issue. When I asked the pastor of the Hermanos en Cristo church why the other churches were less interested in projects to help the poor in the community he said, "They didn't return to the next planning meeting when they saw it involved work not just preaching."

²⁴ He had gone to a pentecostal church for one year eight years ago.

²⁵ This would be even more true with regard to structural injustice. Acts of charity are more readily accepted, perhaps because they do not distract church members as much from what is perceived as the main mission of the church.

concern is not part of their fundamental theological framework. Rather it is like an appendix. From their perspective, social concern could be taken away without any significant damage done to the life of the church.²⁶

DISCONTENT LEADS TO A NEW CHURCH

Amor Fe y Vida Church is less than three years old. A group of about 30 people who had left Principe de Paz church combined with a smaller church that was meeting in a home. The formation of this church is especially significant in relation to the above discussion because Amor Fe y Vida Church began with the explicit intention of demonstrating concern for both soul and body. They desired to help the needy in the community and to work for justice in Las Mesetas. The personal history of a few of the members of this church provides interesting material for reflection. At the end of this section, after the personal histories, I will offer some comments on their significance. I will begin with Jorge.²⁷ By telling his story I will also recount what led to the division with Principe de Paz.

Personal Histories

Jorge

In the past, Jorge, although not much of a Catholic, strongly criticized evangelicals—even throwing things at them when they preached in the park. Then he started working in a shoe-making shop with a few evangelicals. Although he never went to their church, he did listen to them. One night he was drunk and got beat up, which left him thinking about his life and his family. (He had a baby daughter and a common-law wife.) He then went to a Principe de Paz church, liked it, and five meetings later accepted

²⁶ Bonilla, Plutarco. "Crisis del Protestantismo Costarricense actual." *Pastoralia* 9, 18 (Julio, 1987): 67.

²⁷ This name and the others in this section are fictitious.

Jesus Christ as his savior. He stopped drinking and became more responsible with his family. Three years later when he moved to Las Mesetas he helped a pastor sent by the denomination to start a Principe de Paz church in las Mesetas.

Jorge remained very involved as a leader in the church. Along with some others from the church, he attended some seminars given by the Mennonite church. They had been invited by two former Principe de Paz pastors who had become Mennonites. These seminars, and books they read, led a group within the church to begin to think about Christianity differently. They became disgruntled with the church's behavior towards needy members. There was a death in one family and the church only gave the family four dollars. Another time the husband of one of the women in the church died, and the church seemed indifferent to her needs. Most people were more focused on the expense of their building project.

Jorge and a few others proposed assigning the pastor a designated salary instead of giving him all of the tithe money. They thought this would both bring more clarity to the way finances were handled, and would allow the church to have some money to set up a fund to help needy people. But the pastor and some church leaders accused Jorge and the others of being communists. They said the church could not change because it was a policy of the national denomination. Within five months the conflict had become so intense that a group of thirty members left the church. This group soon joined with a smaller church and formed Amor Fe y Vida Church. Jorge is the pastor.²⁸

²⁸ Although the main purpose of this section is to reflect on these individuals' experiences and this church's history in relation to the escapist stereotype, we can also see in their histories correlation with other studies of evangelicalism in Latin America. For instance Jorge shows how Evangelicalism opens up a ladder of leadership possibilities not found in the Catholic Church. He and this group also demonstrate the potential, again not found in the Catholic Church, for dissident evangelicals to leave and join another church or to start their own church. (See for instance, Stoll (1990] 36-37). They have also displayed the difference that Angela Hoekstra points out between pastors and *terratienientes*. Whereas the workers depend on the *terratieniente* and in many ways are tied to him, the pastor depends on the church members and must work to keep them (Hoekstra in Boudewijnse, 48).

Oscar

Oscar lived with his mother who washed and ironed clothes to survive. Oscar recalls, "Every week at the Catholic Church all the people would greet my mother and say 'peace,' but outside of the church they were hypocrites and unjust. They paid my mother very little." Their actions during the week made going to church intolerable, so he stopped attending when he was nine.

At thirteen Oscar left his home to come to the city to try to get a job and go to school. For a time, he lived with a relative who was married to an evangelical pastor. This man, however, yelled so much in the home that Oscar became disillusioned with evangelicalism as well. After this, in his words, he became more "worldly," unimpressed with either church.

For various reasons a number of years later Oscar decided to become a Christian. He thought he should do this in a church, so he went to the church closest to his house in Las Mesetas—Centro Cristiano Gracia y Poder. The very first night he went forward and publicly expressed his desire to be reconciled with God. He took his new Christianity seriously and soon became a member with privileges, and later a leader in the church. He found, however, that others were not as serious as he was. After two years he and his girlfriend left the church for basically the same reason he had left the Catholic Church—hypocrisy.

They visited another church, but the authoritarianism of the pastor caused them to never return. (In his sermon the pastor had said, "I am the one in charge in this church"). They became married, but were not attending any church. Oscar, however, recounts having a special experience with God through which he came to understand that God was more interested in him as a person than his behavior. Having greater confidence in the love of God, Oscar was better able to admit his own weaknesses. He saw that he was not perfect, but that God still loved him. This experience gave him the desire to tell others about God's love, but he thought he should be in a church to do so. Again, He and his wife went to a nearby church. That little church later united with the group that left Principe de Paz to become Amor Fe y Vida.

Oscar appreciates the emphasis in Amor Fe y Vida on attempting to do things to help the community. Even so, he still sees some of what he saw in the Catholic Church. As evangelicals they say, "God bless you" instead of "peace," but it bothers him that, although they say that, they do not do more to help the poorest in the church.

Sergio

Sergio had a difficult childhood. His grandmother raised him, but she died when he was ten. A few years later he left his hometown and went to work on a coffee plantation in the mountains. The manager of the farm was an evangelical preacher. Sergio recalls:

He preached every night, but his actions during the day "preached" a different message. They did not give us much food, and he only paid us \$10 a month. I wondered how he could preach and have the 200 of us who worked on the farm living in such misery. Looking back on it, I think the farm owners liked to have a preacher there because they thought if he could get the workers to convert they wouldn't steal or complain.

Sergio eventually left the farm and came to the city. He found work, but also started drinking more and using drugs. In 1976, he met a missionary from Sweden who had started a pentecostal church. Sergio was very impressed that, besides offering to help him stop drinking, the missionary offered to send him to night school so he could learn to read. Sergio was amazed at the contrast with the pastor/manager at the plantation. He saw that this missionary wanted to help him in concrete ways. Sergio soon became a Christian.

In 1990 he and his family moved to Las Mesetas. Jorge and his wife visited Sergio and his family a number of times and they started going to Principe de Paz. They left with the group that formed Amor Fe y Vida.

Martin

In the mid-seventies Martin had become involved with the progressive wing of the Catholic Church that stressed the preferential option for the poor. He became an activist in social movements within the Catholic Church. He moved to the capital and joined popular organizations and progressive political movements. Martin was an early resident of Las Mesetas, and participated in the *Patronato* and community organizations. The Catholic Church in Las Mesetas, however, did not have the activist spirit or an emphasis on the option for the poor. So he found little reason to go to church. The early 1980's were difficult years in Honduras. By 1984, a number of his activist friends had been killed by military death squads. He felt alone and discouraged, and at times even became drunk. He did not feel supported by the local Catholic church, nor did he sense they had anything to offer that would help him in his current struggles. Searching for help Martin started going to an evangelical church—La Mizpa. Although the pastor never spoke about justice from the pulpit, he impressed Martin as a wise man. Martin received the personal support he felt he needed at that time, and remained active in the church.²⁹

Martin doubts that he would have stayed in the church as many years as he did if he had not encountered some people from a Presbyterian church in Seattle who desired to cooperate with the churches in Las Mesetas.³⁰ They were much more open-minded than the evangelicals Martin knew in Las

²⁹ Martin's experience matches what many have pointed out, that evangelical churches offer more pastoral help than many people perceive most Catholic Churches offering. This is given as one explanation of the growth of evangelicalism. Like many other evangelicals Martin, Jorge and Sergio, came to the evangelical church at a time of crisis in their lives (See Gill, 712). Although all four of these men migrated to the city, apparently supporting Willems and others who argue for the theory of social disorganization as an explanation of growth. Their histories in fact support Hoffnagel's challenge to Willems. All four had lived in the city for some time before joining an evangelical church. (Hoffnagel found that in a large pentecostal church in Recife, Brazil 51% of the migrants had belonged to rural pentecostal churches before moving to the city, and that many others had migrated long before joining the church [Hoffnagel, 40]).

³⁰ This Seattle church hoped to work in partnership with the evangelical churches in Las Mesetas to improve the living conditions there. The local churches, however, were not as interested, and some did not see this as part of their ministry. After a number of years of trying they ended up working more closely with a small Honduran development agency. Through this agency they loaned residents in Las Mesetas money to build houses and start small businesses.

Mesetas. Their periodic visits encouraged him. Rather than drop out he decided to attempt to educate evangelicals and help them become more involved in their community. Eventually, out of frustration, Martin left this church. In the group that left Principe de Paz he saw people with thoughts similar to his own so he joined up with them.

Conclusion

These four who attend Amor Fe y Vida church, and others with similar stories now have the opportunity to attempt as a church community to improve the quality of life in Las Mesetas. There is no institutional structure standing in their way, nor any official ideology or doctrines they must battle. Even so, many of them, although convinced of the importance of working for justice, are still sorting through the theology and ideology they picked up in other churches. Others have their theology worked out, but are unsure of what practical steps they should take. A few, like Martin, have had much experience in community work and see the need for educating others in the church on how to reflect upon the situation in Las Mesetas in order to know better how to respond.

Amor Fe y Vida has not yet become the church it would like to be. Members of this church, however, have the opportunity to try. Their stories raise the question of how many other people today sit in evangelical churches frustrated because they do not have this opportunity to participate in social change. How many others have left evangelical and Catholic churches because of the lack of opportunity or the injustice and hypocrisy they saw in the church?

Martin himself recognizes that although there are probably frustrated people in other churches, it is rare that people have the ability to think critically about the situation. It is even rarer that they are encouraged to do so. Therefore, people need both the ability to think for themselves and the confidence to do so. Because, as Martin said,

If a person questions something in the church, the pastor and others back the person into a corner with no way out. The person must accept things as they are. If they don't, they

are told they are criticizing not only the church but God. Therefore this situation requires someone capable of questioning if he or she is actually standing against God. This person must be able to use the Bible to support his or her argument.

Using the Bible in this way does not necessarily mean people will convince the pastor, but it may mean they will convince themselves and will continue to reflect in a critical way.

The Amor Fe y Vida church demonstrates that this critical thinking is possible within evangelicalism. At the same time their experience also shows that the space to think in this way and the opportunity to address injustices and physical needs in the community is not easily obtained in the typical evangelical church in Las Mesetas.

PART II

EVANGELICAL CHURCHES AND LEGALISM

RULES

The decision to become a Christian is not a joyous one. Rather the step is taken with a sense of resignation. Knowing what will be demanded, one becomes a Christian and then must decide which one of the ten evangelical "jails" to join. (An active member of one of the ten evangelical churches in Las Mesetas.)

Evangelicals are best known in Las Mesetas for their strict observance of rules such as no drinking, no dancing, no drugs, and no smoking. Members are required to tithe their earnings and attend all church services--six or seven nights a week in most churches. Churches will not baptize anyone in a common-law marriage (the status of 38% of the households in Las Mesetas). Although the rule against drinking and the emphasis on sexual fidelity conflicts with the typical male's lifestyle more than the females,' women must comply with many more rules in the area of dress and appearance. Some churches do prohibit men from wearing blue jeans, and one church does not allow men to wear shorts. Most churches, however, do not allow women to wear pants, shorts, or short skirts. They also prohibit women from wearing jewelry, using makeup, or cutting their hair. A number of the churches require women to

wear head coverings in church.³¹

This list is overwhelming for many people living in Las Mesetas. One day I stopped for a few minutes to talk to a woman whose house I had passed many times. When I found out she had been attending an evangelical church for about a year, I asked her what she thought of the church. She replied, "Many requirements." A few minutes later I spoke to her neighbor, who was wearing earrings and a short skirt, I was surprised to find out that she too went to a pentecostal church every once in a while and had gone faithfully for a year. When she mentioned that the church emphasized good behavior, I asked her what some of the rules were. She replied, "There are a lot of rules" (*un monton*).

This is not to say people think negatively of evangelicals. A number of non-evangelicals acknowledged the concrete positive affects of people not drinking, and, in general, evangelicals are seen as people who do not cause problems in the *colonia*.³² Many parents of teenagers would be glad to have their children go to church every night instead of roaming Las Mesetas with one of the local gangs. This study will not focus, however, on evaluating the outward behavioral changes the rules produce. Rather, this paper will center on how the rules are communicated, and how the emphasis on rules affects the nature of the churches. Our interest is in how people respond to the rules, and how the rules themselves, not the obedience of the rules, affect their lives.

RULES AND THE PEOPLE'S CONCEPT OF A GOOD CHRISTIAN

What does one need to do to be an evangelical believer? According to a woman who goes to church occasionally, but who had gone faithfully for a year, *One must "llevar bien las cosas de Dios." Be faithful, behave well and obey the rules.*

³¹ Although people would occasionally mention the importance of honesty, love, good relationships with neighbors, or avoiding envy, the above, more easily measured list of things is what both evangelicals and non-evangelicals would talk about when asked about the norms of conduct in evangelical churches.

³² Lalive d'Epinay's research in Chile led him to a similar conclusion. He states that most everyone agrees that a positive contribution of pentecostalism is its success in getting people to stop drinking (Lalive d' Epinay 151).

Norms are important to any group for defining expected behavior and for separating those in the group from the rest of society.³³ Behavioral norms, however, seem especially important to evangelical Christians in Las Mesetas because changed behavior is central to people's understanding of what it means to be a *creyente*.³⁴

When asked to finish the phrase: "A Christian is someone who . . .", all the church members I interviewed included the idea of putting into practice what the Bible says or following the example of Jesus. For many that is all they said.³⁵ Their concept of Christianity focuses especially on the person's behavior. Only three church members mentioned belief in Christ or forgiveness of sins in their answer.

Although all of these people focused on behavior in defining who a Christian is, they gave a different answer when asked what one had to do to become a Christian. They gave answers that included the traditional evangelical emphasis on grace and forgiveness of sin.

Since the Reformation, Protestants have differentiated themselves from Catholics on the issue of grace and works. They have accused Catholics of teaching, or at least implying, that one is saved by works. The evangelicals in Las Mesetas would argue strongly for the doctrine that a person is saved, not by his or her deeds, but by the grace of God. All that is required is to admit that one is a sinner and believe that through Jesus Christ there is forgiveness. These church members gave a doctrinally correct answer to this question about entrance in to the church. These moments of grace, however, are fleeting.

³³ For example, André Droogers links the strict rules in evangelicalism to the desire for strict rules in a situation of *anomie* (In Boudewijnse, 23).

³⁴ Evangelicals will say, "I became a Christian three years ago," and understand that as referring to the time when they converted. For them, to be a Christian and to be an evangelical are synonymous. But because Catholics also call themselves Christians, in this paper I will use the Spanish word "*creyente*" (believer) to refer to evangelical Christians. This word or the phrase "*creyente evangelico*" are used by both evangelicals and non-evangelicals to refer to evangelical Christians.

³⁵ Two examples: "A Christian is someone who does the will of God and obeys and practices what is in the Bible." "A Christian is someone who not only walks around with a Bible, but someone who by his actions gives testimony to the fact that he is a Christian."

When it comes to staying in, a person's works become the priority.³⁶

This emphasis on behavior defining who is and who is not a *creyente* affects the way non-evangelicals think about evangelical Christianity. When I asked Catholics and people on the fringes of evangelicalism what one needed to do to become a *creyente evangélico*, all except one spoke of behavior and obeying rules.³⁷ The evangelical emphasis on rules has apparently overwhelmed the doctrine of grace. Clearly, outside the church, and, we will later see, inside the church as well, people think that evangelicals teach one must be good in order to be a Christian and go to heaven. People tend to think they must straighten out their lives in order to become an evangelical Christian. A woman, who liked to visit evangelical churches, said, "I almost accepted Jesus Christ last night." When I asked why she did not, she explained she could not accept Jesus because she was a sinner. For her, accepting Jesus and complying with the rules of the church were the same thing. For various reasons she could not marry her common-law husband, and therefore, from her perspective, she could not become an evangelical Christian.³⁸

If asked specifically, the members of the church she visited, like the ones I interviewed, would probably say that putting one's life in order comes *after* accepting Jesus Christ as your savior. Yet they have communicated something quite different to this woman and others like her. Or, at least, they have not done enough to correct her mistaken view.

Although there is plenty of talk about God in the churches, one senses that the most important "doctrines" are the ones that deal with behavior.³⁹ Because of this focus, the rules about behavior are

³⁶ As one church member said to me, "The way it is here, a person accepts Christ one day and the next day the church leaders arrive with the machete to tell the person what to do and what not to do."

³⁷ The one exception said: "One needs to know and understand the things of God." If I had worded the question differently, such as: "What does one need to do to accept Jesus as your savior?" they may have given different answers. I purposefully did not do that because I wanted to see what was foremost in their minds in regards to the issue of becoming an evangelical.

³⁸ This woman's understanding is not unique. In Santiago Chile, David Dixon observed that, "evangelicals reported changing their lives of sin to lives of righteousness before they started going to church" (In Stoll [1993], 4).

quite important for the *creyentes* in Las Mesetas. We look now at how these rules are communicated, how churches motivate members to obey the rules, and how people feel about the rules.

HOW RULES ARE COMMUNICATED

People often gave vague answers when asked how their church communicated rules to new members. Although some churches give new-members classes where they go over the doctrines and rules of the church, and although the churches that are part of a denomination have printed versions of the church's beliefs and regulations, the fact is that people often know the common rules even before they go to the church.⁴⁰ Rules they do not know are quickly learned up by observation and by hearing the church leaders motivating the members to continue to obey a certain rule. For instance, one woman explained that no one told her to stop wearing pants or using makeup. But after seeing the other woman at church she came home and got rid of her jeans and makeup and has not cut her hair since then.

A few church members complained that little explanation came with the rules. They wished there was more emphasis given to explaining why certain things were harmful. They had simply been told not to do certain things, and usually given a verse from the Bible to back up the command. Any explanation did not go much beyond the principal that Christians must differentiate themselves from the world.

³⁹ When I asked *creyentes* how their church differed from the other churches in Las Mesetas, they usually would first mention how the Central American Church, La Mizpa, did not clap their hands and had much mellower times of worship. Then people would say there were some doctrinal differences with other churches. When I asked for examples they almost always mentioned "doctrines" like: "the women in our church do not wear head coverings," or "we do not believe in remarriage after divorce." They equated rules to doctrine, and rarely mentioned a difference between churches that actually related to doctrinal or theological belief.

⁴⁰ One woman while telling me how her non-evangelical neighbors respected her said: "For instance they've never invited me to a party." Her neighbors did not have to join a church to know that evangelicals do not drink or dance. Another woman explained that when she told her family she had become a *creyente* they said "*Ya te arruniaste*" (Literally: now you've ruined yourself) "Aren't you going to miss dancing?" They knew what it meant to become an evangelical. (See Stoll [1993] 4).

MOTIVATION TO OBEY THE RULES

Privileges

I wanted to go up front to lead the songs and preach. That motivated me to attend faithfully and obey the rules. (A nineteen year old woman recalling what she thought when she was 15.) Because of my studies I started to only go to church on Saturday and Sunday. No one ever came and told me that I lost my privileges, but they stopped asking me to lead any part of the church service. (A woman who eventually left that church.)

Only baptized church members in good standing (those who keep the rules) have the privilege of having positions of leadership in the church and of being able to preach, lead singing, or sing solos during a church service. Just as the prospect of obtaining privileges motivates people to begin to comply with the rules, the threat of losing privileges deters people from breaking the rules. If they do not comply people are placed in *disciplina* for a period of time—losing their privileges. For instance a woman at one church in Las Mesetas was in *disciplina* because she cut her hair. The aim, of course, is not to expel people from the church, but to encourage people to follow the regulations. People can regain their privileges by admitting their error, and by again complying with the rule over a period of time. At times, however, as in the quote above, people may lose their privileges without officially being in *disciplina*.

Gaining or losing privileges are the main means of rewarding good behavior and punishing bad behavior. In addition, since many Hondurans view God as a figure that rewards good behavior and punishes bad, churches often link God's actions directly to the behavior of the individual Christians. While preaching about healing, one speaker said, "When we want to receive something from God we must first do what God asks us to do."⁴¹ In one church when a man stopped attending, the pastor prayed

⁴¹ Churches presents their lists of rules, not as a human list, but as God's commands taken from the Bible. For instance, when I asked one pastor what rules of behavior his church had. He replied, "We do not have any, just those that are stipulated in the Bible." I knew, from talking to former members of his church that they had a number of very strict rules, including some which are mentioned only indirectly in the Bible, and others which are not mentioned at all (such as: no dancing, men cannot wear shorts, no makeup, and no going to the movies).

that God would cause him to lose his job to show him the error of his ways. Those listening to the prayer would have to wonder what punishment the pastor would seek if *they* left the church.

Providing A Good Example

Those in leadership do not maintain their behavior only to keep their privileges, but also because they recognize the responsibility they have to model good behavior to others in the church. Pastors explicitly appeal to this when a leader is wavering on a specific rule. More commonly it appeared that leaders used this in a self-motivating way. For example even if they did not feel like going to church, or fasting when a fast had been called, they told me they would because they were a leader.

Obeying To Avoid Shame

When I had first stopped going to church every day I felt fine. I thought my studies were an appropriate reason not to go. Then one time when I was in church a woman came over to me and said, "Aren't you going to go up to the altar and become reconciled with God." I replied "Why?", but then I realized that since I had not been coming every day this woman equated this with backsliding. From her perspective I had a problem I needed to work out with God. Her question made me feel very bad. I began to go to church less and less, and got to the point that I really was out of relationship with God. Eventually I stopped going to church at all (same woman as previous quote).

One time the church sent us out to evangelize. They did not train us, and I had never gone before. They paired me with a teenage boy who had some experience. I talked with the woman at the first house we went to. She said she was a Catholic and content. So I did not push her, and we left very soon. Out in the street the boy said to me, "You are nothing of a Christian if you cannot convince a Catholic. A Christian knows how to conquer someone for Christ. Let's go back I'll show you how." I was embarrassed and felt like a failure. I've never gone evangelizing since then. (A teenage woman who is an active church member).

The phrase: "Ella no anda bien con Dios," literally, "She does not walk well with God," marks failure for those aspiring to holiness. They know these words will be applied to them if they do not maintain their obedience. Desiring to avoid shame motivates them to continue. The same shame,

however, can cause them to totally drop out if they do stumble. One woman reported that to be at peace with others in the church, to feel comfortable in relation to them, one must obey the rules. As Rubem Alves writes, "the [creyente] is confronted with the terrible certainty that he or she will be accepted by the community only if he or she does not transgress the limits of the permissible."⁴²

Scolding The Creyentes

My youngest daughter was falling asleep during the church service, but I scolded her saying "Don't fall asleep or I will punish you!" (A mother, leader in her church, proudly told me this story).

I had invited a friend to the Saturday night young peoples church service. In the middle of his sermon the speaker covered a glass with mud. He asked, "Can God live in such a dirty glass? Can God manifest himself through such a dirty glass? Those who use makeup are like this muddy glass." My friend was the only person in the room with makeup on. She never returned. (A woman in her 20's recalling an incident from the church she used to attend).

Sermons that condemn and scold are common. They are seen as a tool to maintain the resolve of the faithful and to move those who do not comply to do so. For instance, preachers will say that those who do not tithe are stealing from God. Those who do not attend all the church services are dishonoring God, and also run the risk of losing their faith.⁴³ As in this last case, this style of sermon often plays on the fears of the people.

⁴² Rubem A. Alves, Protestantism and Repression: A Brazilian Case Study, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985) 147.

⁴³ Apparently, most church members do not think that just because they did not go to church everyday they would directly lose their salvation. Rather, they felt they needed to go to church everyday so that they would maintain a good relationship with God and, hence, keep from doing things that could cause them to lose their salvation.

Afraid Not To Obey

A friend told me that I have lost my salvation because I cut my hair. Is that true? (A woman asked this in 1992 during a seminar in Las Mesetas on how to interpret the Bible).

Many evangelicals use the threat of Hell to bring people into the church and to keep them in line once in the church. One man, who is now a pastor, recalls that he stopped drinking mostly because he heard preachers say that drunks went to Hell.⁴⁴

People's fear leads them to respond to these rules in different ways. One man who goes to Catholic services every week told me that he did not feel capable of being an evangelical. He said, "I am afraid that if I become an evangelical, and later find I cannot do all that is demanded and go astray, I will feel bad with myself, with God, and with others."

HOW PEOPLE FEEL IN RELATION TO THESE RULES

There were a couple years when I was pretty tense about all these rules. There were times when I wondered if I was saved. If I missed a few days of church I'd be afraid of God (a man in his 40's).

The pastor would say, "Tomorrow there is a fast." I did not want to fast, but then I would think, "God might punish me if I don't." So I'd fast. Or I might think, "I want to be a leader, I'd better do this." In that church I found an oppressive environment, not one of understanding. I think many people have spiritual problems, but they keep them hidden. They have a terrible fear of what others would say and the scolding they would get. So they don't tell anyone. This happened to me. I did something wrong, but told no one. . . I once did an experiment in the church I go to now. I was assigned to preach, but I did not preach in the normal way. I had a discussion with the people. I said, "I would like to belong to a church where I could feel like I was in my family. Where if I had economic needs I could ask others for help. Where I could live honestly without having to pretend that I am perfect." People, even those who never talk in

⁴⁴ This individual is very glad he stopped drinking. He sees that as a good thing, but he will not preach that sermon himself. He wishes they would have preached more about the negativeness of drinking itself. I encountered another example of this threat in relation to makeup and earrings. Two teenage sisters were told they "*andan ma!*" and were going to Hell because they started using makeup and earrings.

church, said "That would be beautiful." (a man in his early 30's).

It is hard to know how people feel about these rules. A few people, like the two quoted above, talked to me about their feelings in relation to the rules. Most did not. Although these few were critical, it is noteworthy how positively another woman spoke of a sermon in which a guest speaker scolded them strongly (*nos dio duro*). There was no hint that she had any negative feelings about the rules.

If one obeys the rules, these churches are a good place to be. The successful rule keeper is given affirmation and status. There is not, however, much emotional space to fail. Because of this it appears it is to everyone's advantage to emphasize the rules they do. Although they are certainly demanding, they are achievable and measurable. There was very little talk about character qualities, such as patience, love, and unselfishness, which are harder to achieve and measure. The rules on marriage offer a good example.

Rules About Marriage

They are more concerned with what I wear than what I am like as a wife (a married woman referring to the leaders in her church).

One of the questions I asked was: "What does someone need to do to become an official member of your church?" Although some churches have a defined process with stipulated steps and time periods required to become a member, many were rather informal and subjective. Everyone who answered that question, however, mentioned baptism as a prerequisite. Then they added that if a person had a husband or wife they had to be married before they could be baptized. A legal marriage is a very important stepping stone, or road block, for many in evangelical churches.

On one hand, one could argue that this is a socially constructive rule. Non-Christian women's organizations also work to encourage people in common-law relationships to marry. They see it as a way to give some legal protection to women and force men to be more responsible. Especially when combined

with the church's emphasis on sexual fidelity, this rule makes a significant step towards stabilizing families in Honduras.⁴⁵

On the other hand, this rule highlights the weakness of an external rules orientation. One interview made this quite clear. The woman is married and baptized, a member of her church. Yet her husband does not live with her,⁴⁶ and she admits they have a very poor relationship. As she put it: "There is much lacking on both sides." But, according to the rules she is fine, a member in good standing.

With the focus on rules it is too easy for people to deal only with relatively superficial issues.⁴⁷ Also, making rules the priority too easily allows the church to pronounce right or wrong without acknowledging the complexity of the situations. For instance, if a man had married someone when he was young, left her without getting a divorce, later started living with someone else with whom he had children, and then becomes a *creyente*, many churches would demand he leave his present family and return to his original wife. They would demand this even if he had been living with his current spouse for 20 years, and even if the previous wife had also united with someone else. The man could never be baptized and become a member unless he did this. Although this may appear as an extreme example, it is not a rare situation. One man reported that he knew three people who had ended up leaving churches for this exact reason.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Brusco's (in Garrard-Burnett and Stoll) and Lesley Gill's work challenge us to not overlook the positive changes that can happen to men who become *creyentes*. Both for following these rules, and perhaps most significantly by not drinking. Brusco and Gill both argue that women allow a certain amount of male domination in pentecostal churches, because they recognize the great benefits women receive by having men involved in the church. The implication is that if the women pushed for more equality in the churches, they might also push the men out. A number of women and men in Las Mesetas did comment on how the situation in their home had changed for the better when they had become evangelicals. Others, although not denying these positive changes, communicated the need for more improvement in the home.

⁴⁶ They cannot afford their own house. She refuses to live with his family and he refuses to live with hers. So, he lives with his mother on the other side of the city, and she and the children live with her mother.

⁴⁷ This is not to say that all evangelicals only remain at the level of this rule in relation to marriage. Many spoke of significant changes in their relationships.

The much more common example is when one partner, usually the woman, is a *creyente* and wants to get married, but the other partner does not want to. Theoretically, these people could be in the church for years, fulfilling every other requirement, but they would never be able to be baptized, become a member, lead a song, preach, or participate in the Eucharist.⁴⁸

It appears this rules-mentality lends itself to placing people in cut-and-dry categories. Most interviewees did not use the term that I am using, a "common-law" relationship. Instead they spoke of those who were married and those "living in adultery." One wonders what it would feel like to be one of those *creyente* woman who has been faithful to her common-law husband, for many years, and yet hear someone else talk about women in her situation as adulteresses because they do not have a legal document saying they are married. One also wonders how many women and men leave the church after a year or two, frustrated and shamed because they feel like a second-class citizens. These questions point to issues discussed in the next section: boundaries and divisions in the church.

DISTINCTIONS AND BOUNDARY LINES

Within The Church

Almost everyone reported that, in their church, people treated the members and non-members, and even those in discipline, in the same manner. That is to say they greet and talk with all people in the church in the same way regardless of their status in the church. Since, however, the rules and membership privileges are so clearly delineated, it is inevitable that below the superficially equal treatment, divisions of status are felt. For instance, when a pastor in one church states publicly that only those who pray

⁴⁸ This is not only an evangelical issue. The Catholic church will not allow couples with only common-law relationships to participate in the Eucharist. Some evangelical churches in Las Mesetas have opened up some space in this area, they will allow people in this category to have minor privileges, such as taking up the offering. One church has taken the step of allowing them to lead singing.

loudly are truly filled with the Holy Spirit, he has then set up an elite group in the church.⁴⁹

Whether the people with privileges in the church actually feel superior is difficult to know. That some of those without privileges feel they are second-class is easier to show. One woman told me she viewed the leaders in her church as superior to the rest. She had the sense that only they would go to heaven. She felt discriminated against because only the leaders went to seminars and conferences sponsored by the denomination. She thought that unless she crossed the boundary line into this elite group she would not grow and advance as a Christian.

External Boundary Lines

The lines drawn between churches, and the differing treatment and attitude between *creyentes* and non-*creyentes*, are more obvious and more readily admitted. In spite of their differences, however, there is a general spirit of unity between the evangelical churches in Las Mesetas. They co-operate in joint evangelistic campaigns, visit each others' meetings,⁵⁰ and usually greet each other by saying "God bless you sister (or brother)."⁵¹ This, however, is not universally true. One woman stated that now that she has started wearing pants people from other churches, specifically the one she used to attend, address her as "*amiga*"—no longer as "sister" (Even though she addresses them with the terms sister or brother).

There is also one church, Amor Fe y Vida, which is purposefully left out of many joint activities. Pastors speak against the group that broke off from another church to form Amor Fe y Vida. In essence

⁴⁹ A woman told me of a similar, and quite common, example. She visited a church for six months, but eventually left and has not gone to any other church. She said that they were constantly pushing her to be baptized in the Holy Spirit and speak in tongues. She did not, and got tired of being pushed and experiencing the sense of not being part of the "in" group in the church who had spoken in tongues.

⁵⁰ Entire churches will go visit others. Most churches, however, do not look positively on individual members visiting another church.

⁵¹ People, however, commented that certain churches were less friendly than others. A number of people said to me: "I always greet them as brother or sister and say 'God bless you,' but I don't sense they are too interested in talking to me, and I wonder if they would greet me, if I did not greet them."

they tell their church members to stay away from these division-makers.⁵²

Iglesia de Dios de la Profecía officially sees itself as superior to the other churches. They think of themselves as *the* church. According to the Iglesia de Dios de la Profecía, other evangelicals, although they will still be saved, have deviated from the truth in some way. The woman I interviewed from this church explained that they do not expect the union of other churches into their church, the one true church, until Christ returns.⁵³ From her perspective her church relates well with other churches. Others, however, told me that people from Iglesia de Dios de la Profecía tend to communicate that their interpretation is *the* right one, and the person from the other church is simply wrong.⁵⁴

Given that there are boundary lines drawn between churches, obviously the lines drawn between evangelicals and non-evangelicals are even more distinct. One Roman Catholic teenager⁵⁵ complained to me that he feels like evangelicals categorize him as being a bad person. He has evangelical friends, but people from their church have advised them that it would be better to stay away from him.

Although they claim to accept people and treat them equally, on both an internal and external level, the priority given to rules of behavior leads evangelicals to make distinctions and draw boundary

⁵² Although there are theological differences between this group and most of the other churches in Las Mesetas, that does not appear to be the reason for this treatment. The reality is that there are theological differences between other churches in Las Mesetas, but they do not put the "ban" on each other simply for that reason. The members of the excluded church told me that they perceive that their treatment is because their action was a threat to all the other church leaders in Las Mesetas.

⁵³ This woman was very aware of the difference between her church and Iglesia de Dios de Pentecostes. (The differences are traced back to a split that occurred in a denomination in the United States many years ago. But when asked why the other churches in Las Mesetas were not true churches, she struggled to give a concrete answer. When she did, her answer lacked logic. She said that her church has *gobierno* (government), and the other churches do not. She said, "We have a General in Tennessee and a national supervisor, a district supervisor, and we have a church flag."

⁵⁴ One woman singled out the Iglesia de Dios de Profecía and La Mizpa as the churches whose members most often ignored her or treated her with indifference (in contrast to the greetings from members of other churches). (La Mizpa has the greatest number of theological differences with the other churches, being the only non-pentecostal evangelical church in the barrio).

⁵⁵ He attends mass, downtown in the Cathedral, infrequently. He is the only person I talked to who had never even visited an evangelical church.

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