

JUAN F. THOMSON,
CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AND THE
BEGINNINGS OF SPANISH-LANGUAGE
PROTESTANT PREACHING IN THE
RIVER PLATE

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Recently I assumed an executive position with the United Methodist Church as Area Secretary for Chile, Argentina and Uruguay. Previously I served as a missionary in Argentina, from 1978-1987. There are questions about Protestant Christianity in Argentina that piqued my curiosity over the years. Why are Protestants largely anti-Catholic? Why are Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians widely known for their abstinence about smoking, drinking, and premarital sex? When confronted with challenges of living a virtuous life in the midst of a sinful society, Christians have always tried to forge a markedly distinct identity. The fast growing evangelical and Pentecostal churches of Argentina are forging today a distinct "evangelical" identity that contrasts with prevailing "Western" ways (i.e., drug and sex culture).

To learn more about the roots of Christian identity, I began reading about the beginnings of the Protestant movement in the River Plate. I discovered the name of Juan F. Thomson. In Wade Crawford Barclay's *History of Methodist Missions*, a footnote briefly sketched the life of Juan F. Thomson:¹

John F. Thomson (1843-1933) was born in Plymouth, England, and emigrated in 1853 to Argentina. He graduated from Ohio Wesleyan in 1866 and the same year married Helen Jane Goodfellow,

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a niece of William Goodfellow. For many years he served as Presiding Elder in Argentina and Uruguay. Thomson was an eloquent speaker but was most widely known for the vigorous, polemical character of his sermons. He was fond of debate and did not hesitate to take on any opponent in theological and ecclesiastical controversy, frequently being the challenger. He had great influence in scholarly circles, particularly among university students.

Barclay mentioned Thomson concerning the first Spanish-speaking service conducted in Argentina. Thomson preached. During that first service, according to Barclay, a larger group of people gathered outside the house than inside. Protesters had gathered to throw rocks and tufts of grass at the house. Police had to come to protect the worshipers.²

Thomson's preaching career had begun turbulently. He was a Protestant in a fiercely Roman Catholic land. It had been but twelve years since non-Catholic worship in the Spanish language had been legalized. Thomson's entire career would be spent preaching the "gospel according to Protestantism." He would attack the Roman Catholic Church in pulpit and press (he was for years the Director of the Methodist newspaper, *El Estandarte Evangélico*).

The purpose of this article is to explore the roots of today's Christian identity among Protestants, including Evangelicals and Pentecostals, by looking more closely at Juan F. Thomson's life and ministry. It will be necessary to give some background information about Argentina's first Protestant service conducted in Spanish, offer historical evidence suggesting that Juan Thomson incorporated American Protestant Revival techniques into his preaching ministry, and point to some lessons about Christian identity in an age of transition. The countries that compose the "River Plate" are Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay. The focus here will be primarily Argentina. Today these countries are experiencing revival as Evangelical and Pentecostal churches grow in numbers and influence. There are lessons from Thomson's ministry that illumine a similar need in his day and ours for "an identity apart" from prevailing society.

Juan Thomson, the "Man of the Hour" for Spanish Language Protestantism

Protestant work began early in the history of Argentina. Worship services for English, German and Swiss colonists dates from the 1820s.³ A Methodist church was founded in 1836 in the heart of Buenos Aires. But Protestant worship in Spanish was prohibited by law until 1855. Roman Catholicism was the State church and held tight control on the spirituality of the people. An argument between the Roman Catholic

hierarchy and the Argentina dictator, Juan Manuel de Rosas, paved the way toward lifting this prohibition.

According to Methodist historian, Daniel P. Monti, after the fall of Rosas in 1852, Argentina began a thirty-year period of "new horizons." There was a new spirit of openness in the land. After the tight control of dictator Rosas, the country entered a period of liberality. For Protestants, that meant the spread of the gospel could begin without restrictions for the first time.⁴

A new article was passed in the Argentine constitution. While still recognizing the Roman Catholic Church as the State church, it gave freedom of worship to other denominations. U.S. missionaries who served English-speaking congregations immediately sought ways to extend their work to the Spanish-speaking populace.⁵

Internal struggles among the English-speaking congregations and failed attempts to bring Spanish-speaking preachers to the city postponed the long sought work in Spanish. That work began in earnest when the first presiding elder of the Methodist Episcopal church was appointed to the River Plate area (Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay). William Goodfellow arrived in 1857 with a mandate from his Bishop to begin mission work in the Spanish language.

Soon after his arrival Goodfellow met Thomson. The new presiding elder held a "Week of World Prayer" in the English-speaking church located on Cangallo Street in the Summer of 1857 (January 5-12). The bilingual Thomson came to the revival and was deeply influenced by the preaching of Goodfellow. He described the encounter as a rebirth.⁶

Goodfellow took special interest in the fifteen-year-old Thomson, becoming counselor and spiritual mentor to the new convert. He arranged for Thomson to study theology at Ohio Wesleyan University (1862-1866). Before returning to Argentina, Thomson was ordained a deacon at the Erie Annual Conference. He returned to Argentina, then, as a U.S. missionary through the auspices of the Methodist Episcopal Church Missionary Society.⁷

Thomson admitted that his Spanish had become dull after having spent nearly five years of talking only English in Ohio. He had to retrain his tongue upon his return to Buenos Aires in October of 1866. By the beginning of 1867, though, he was ready to commence work in the Spanish language.⁸

He started teaching the Bible in the home of doña Fermina León de Aldeber in the district of Buenos Aires called, "La Boca." The big day, though, came on the 25th of May of that year. Monti described it as "the most memorable date" in the history of the Methodist mission in South America. Although there had been occasional preaching in Spanish before that date, from this time forward regularly scheduled services in Spanish were held. Thomson preached in the same temple where he had been "reborn" ten years earlier.

Many Protestants from around the city came that day to the church, which was known as "the dissident temple,"⁹ to give support to the

Spanish-language initiative. Others were expressly invited. Monti recounts a news article rendition of what happened:

An immense audience came to see the young preacher, not leaving any space vacant. The altar, the steps, and the bench behind the pulpit were all occupied. Members of Congress and the legislature, judges, lawyers, and doctors, mixed with commoners to fill the house of God.¹⁰

The words of Dr. Thomson captivated listeners. His clear and sonorous voice spoke in the distinctive Buenos Aires (porteño) accent of Spanish. According to the Uruguayan Piquinela, his voice "resonated like thunder." He brought "fire to the pulpit," his words spewing forth like sparks. Listeners had to feel the heat of his words and his preaching always kept the temperature high.¹¹

Carlos T. Gattinoni, who heard Thomson speak in the 1920s, described his voice as filling an entire auditorium with resonance without the aid of a microphone and this when the man was in his eighties!¹² Monti wrote that his phrases were filled with colorful anecdotes. He could develop a theme logically and clearly.¹³

Some people who first attended Thomson's preaching came out of curiosity, wanting to know what a Protestant service was like. Others were attracted to Thomson's version of Christianity. Invariably Thomson would point out differences between Catholicism and Protestantism. After the initial period of curiosity waned, the polemical nature of Thomson's preaching turned his church into a battleground. Thomson became renowned for his polemics. Unafraid of controversy or heated argumentation, he developed a following among the common people of Buenos Aires.¹⁴

The difficulty of Protestant evangelization in the midst of a Roman Catholic populace was confirmed by Bishop Thomas B. Wood in a letter written to Methodist Episcopal Church Mission Secretary, Dr. Peck, on November 13, 1893. Wood attempted to convey the circumstances surrounding the Spanish-speaking mission in southern South America: "As late as 1867 I heard Dr. Durbin [a former Mission Secretary] say that *he did not believe that the Catholic American peoples could be evangelized!*" But Wood also spoke of a better day to come: "When the great revivals once begin in South America they will have a sweep as tremendous as that territory is vast."¹⁵

Juan Thomson the Revivalist

Thomson was reborn at a revival led by his mentor William Goodfellow. He was theologically trained at Ohio Wesleyan University. His apprenticeship as an evangelist, though, came as a helper to a colporteur, H. P. Arnauld.¹⁶

Colporteurs were a combination evangelist and Bible salesperson. They went door-to-door selling Bibles and sharing their testimony of Christ to all who were willing to listen. The ministry of colporteurs paved the way for Protestant work in the Spanish language. Arnauld taught Thomson how to evangelize.

The missionaries set up their approach to minister in much the same way as the Methodist Episcopal Church operated in the United States. Throughout the nineteenth century, denominational news articles had become an important aspect of the mission of the church for disseminating information and opinion. The first Spanish-language periodical was called, *El Evangelista*. In 1883 *El Estandarte Evangélico* became the successor to *El Evangelista*. The U.S. missionaries serving the River Plate region took turns as editorial directors. Even while not serving as a director, however, each missionary took part in the editorial production of the eight-page weekly periodical.

On the 75th anniversary of Methodist work in South America (1911), a special edition of *El Estandarte Evangélico* was published, *Número Del Jubileo* (The Jubilee Edition), in which the history of Methodist evangelical mission was recounted. Juan F. Thomson, at the time 68 years old, contributed an article entitled, "Reminiscencias," in which he described various incidents that he had experienced during his long career. Thomson told about fights breaking out during his preaching, rumors of his assassination, and the intense rivalry between the Roman Catholic Church and his Protestant preaching. The following excerpt serves to point out the intense polemical nature of the ministry of Thomson as a pioneer Protestant in a fiercely Roman Catholic milieu. It also gives up a glimpse into the memory of Thomson himself. In the article Thomson always referred to himself in the third person:

In 1878 the enraged papists of the village of San José (Republic of Uruguay) had stormed the Masonic Lodge that was there, and let loose toads and snakes against the enemies of their religion [sic!]. Mr. Thomson accepted an invitation to give a conference in this hostile environment. His friends from Montevideo feared for his life. Accompanied by his valient colleague in the faith, don Bernardino van Domselaar; Thomson came to the large theater. There he made a defense of the Gospel. [Mr. Thomson] had brought letters of recommendation from the great Colonel Latorre and from his very liberal Minister of government, don José M. Montero. Through them he obtained the protection of the chief of Police, and from the commander of the military garrison. Everything came out just as desired—there was an immense and sympathetic audience—after the discourse the officers of the regiment passed in front of the audience with notebooks in hand marking down the names of those who were signing up to subscribe to *El Evangelista*, then the publication of the Mission. More than 70 names were noted. [Thomson] returned to Montevideo and Buenos Aires, where he lived as Interim Superintendent of the Mission. The priest

of San José started to roar more fiercely, reviling every Protestant [on the list], and challenging any of them to argue in public. The first conference was held in September. In December of the same year Mr. Thomson returned to San José and implored the priest to come out into the "wrestling court" to make good his boastful deeds in the presence of his opponent. He did not dare, remaining inside, if not ashamed, at least ridiculous. These little roosters of papism are very valiant when, surrounded by their harem, they are scratching in their own dung-heap, but they sing another song when they throw them in the circus and contemplate the formidable claws of another rooster.¹⁷

Thomson's "[sic!]" in this passage shows his contempt for the Roman Catholic Church. He thought it an error to call it religion. One wonders whether Thomson had learned about intense denominational rivalry while studying at Ohio Wesleyan. Peter Cartwright, who traversed the Midwest when Thomson lived in Ohio, had written his own autobiography in 1856 describing the fierce rivalry between Baptists and Methodists. Polemic and rivalry were part of the education Thomson received in Ohio. Also, 19th century nativism was in full swing in the U.S. From the reminiscence quoted above and many other writings, clearly Thomson brought to his preaching rabid anti-Catholicism. The legacy of nativism remains among Protestants in Argentina. In Methodist Churches throughout the country, neither candles nor clergy robes are used—for fear of appearing too "Catholic."

There is no question that Thomson brought with him to Argentina the Methodist system of itineration. He travelled the city on horseback attending regularly to seven different points of mission. The first church he served, *Segunda Iglesia Metodista*, spawned five other congregations during his tenure, three of which were in Buenos Aires and two in small towns west of the city.

Because of Thomson's gift in preaching, he was sent to new areas in Argentina and Uruguay to help start churches. The *Número del Jubileo* mentioned above includes historical sketches of every Methodist Church in Argentina and Uruguay at the time of its publication (1911). Thomson's name occurs often.

Almost immediately after beginning the Spanish-language work in Buenos Aires, Thomson began traveling across the River Plate to Montevideo. In the sketch on that city's Central Church, the *Número del Jubileo* reports that "Rev. J.F. Thomson was sent to Montevideo to begin the mission."¹⁸ In reference to Thomson's penchant for polemic, the sketch said that "the name of Dr. Thomson always will be the terror of the Roman Catholic cleric, because he was the first to shake them up and expose their untruthfulness."¹⁹

One Montevidean convert was the Rev. Francis G. Penzotti, who would become an agent of the American Bible Society for the River Plate region. He left an account that gives us an idea of the kind of revival that Thomson organized.

At the time [Thomson] was at the very height of his power, and was calling the attention of the whole region on both banks of the River Plate. His eloquence in preaching was then a novelty to those people. It was from his lips that I heard the gospel for the first time. His text on this memorable night was taken from the words of the Lord in the gospel of St. Matthew, Chapter 11, verse 28: 'Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.' The theme could not have been more appropriate for my case, and I went out from there that night profoundly impressed.²⁰

Penzotti was impressed, but not yet convinced. He continued attending the meetings where Thomson preached, though, finding "treasure listening to the gospel." Thomson called the meeting "a week of prayer," which included a morning and an evening conference. Penzotti was deeply moved by the testimonies given by others at these meetings and yearned to experience what these people seemed to enjoy.

I contined to attend the services, feeling in my soul every day greater zeal and anxiety to posses the truth. But my spiritual standing was not what it ought to have been, nor what I desired it should be. My soul had not obtained peace, because, like many others in similar circumstances, I sought 'feelings' in place of simply believing what the Word of God told me. I was at the point of failing when, but the grace of the Lord, the day of victory came, and with it peace and joy overflowed me like a river and the horizon of better days began to appear.²¹

Penzotti's testimony echoes accounts given at revival meetings in the U.S. Is the experience of awakening cross-cultural or does the style of revival evoke similar kinds of responses cross-culturally? Thomson's "week of prayer" format was similar to the revival techniques of Charles Grandison Finney. At the same time that Thomson was studying in Delaware, Ohio, Finney served as President of Oberlin College, also in Ohio. Finney's reputation had been well established and Oberlin in the 1860s was, according to Sydney Ahlstrom, "a center of influence for revival theology."²² Thomson drew upon the same style of revivalism espoused by Finney gathering people in meeting halls in the cities and towns, preaching a gospel that very nearly pressured hearers to accept Christ. The content of Thomson's meetings were the same as Finney and Moody. There was preaching, testimony, and singing.

Thomson was not limited to Argentina and Uruguay. He visited Asunción, Paraguay, in 1881 in order to begin the Methodist mission work there. He also went on a preaching mission in La Paz, Bolivia.²³ Argentina, though, was his main mission field. Although always appointed to a particular church, Thomson would travel to other towns and cities of Argentina to "sow the seeds of the Gospel." The *Número del Jubileo* includes accounts of his initiating work through preaching events in

La Plata in 1888 (Capital of the Province of Buenos Aires). In 1887 Thomson visited the small city west of Buenos Aires, Chivilcoy, where he "conquered the sympathies of the audience and where he nailed, morally, the landmark where the future temple of Truth would be situated in this town." Thomson returned to Chivilcoy in 1889 where one of the saints, Francisco La Moglie, found a meeting room for regular services. Although Thomson appointed a pastor to this charge, he continued to visit twice a month, until the mission outpost was firmly established.²⁴

Similarly Thomson opened mission outposts in Bahía Blanca in 1895 (some 600 miles from the city of Buenos Aires), Junin, Mercedes, and other towns and cities of the Province of Buenos Aires. The pattern was always the same. Thomson would give a series of conferences open to the public, using a common meeting hall, a club, or a private home. These public meetings would last about a week. Persons who attended these meetings and responded to the gospel would become the nucleus upon which more permanent work was established. After "awakening interest in the gospel," Thomson, in his role as presiding elder, would send a younger pastor to establish a church.²⁵

The story of Juan Thomson carries important lessons for evangelization today. He was extraordinarily gifted in his persuasiveness for the gospel. His training ground was door-to-door calling as a colporteur. This one-to-one personal evangelization sowed the seeds for an understanding of the spiritual needs of people. Our modern sensitivities blanch at the fierce anti-Catholicism of Thomson and his era. Yet, behind the polemic stands the principle of Christian identity. Thomson preached a gospel that forged a Christian identity distinct from the prevailing culture.

Roman Catholicism was so entrenched in the River Plate that any alternative view of Christianity had to be completely different, or it would have been absorbed. Protestants in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were known as nondrinkers in a country where the consumption of wine was immense. They were known as nonsmokers in a land where even today smoking is pervasive. Indeed, Protestants have been known for what they "do not do." Today Pentecostals carry on this tradition of moral piety in Argentina. To identify oneself as an Evangelical or Pentecostal in Argentina is to confess a moral lifestyle with strict sexual ethics and a strong work ethic. The message is being heard. According to *Latinamerica Press* Evangelical and Pentecostal churches in Argentina have experienced unprecedented growth in recent years. Membership in evangelical churches increased by 8% from 1987-1991.²⁶

Argentine society is experiencing today the same moral and social challenges that other Western nations confront: rising divorce rates, disintegrating families, drug and alcohol abuse. In the last year Argentina has suffered an economic recession as part of the fallout of the financial crisis in Mexico. Rising unemployment and underemployment have increased stress on families. The gospel spoken clearly and force-

fully as an alternative to decadence is finding larger and larger audiences. The demon for the Evangelicals is no longer Roman Catholicism, but the disintegrating values of Western life. Those who preach a simple and forceful message, as Juan Thomson did in his era, find listeners. Christian identity rooted in a wholesome lifestyle serves as an anchor in a sea of uncertainty of modern times. Juan Thomson called people to give themselves over to Christ and live differently. A similar message is being heard today.

The vestiges of nativism remain in Argentina. There is tension in relations between the two expressions of Christianity from both sides. Pentecostalism particularly has advanced throughout the Latin American region with enormous growth. In 1936 only 2% of Latin America's Protestants were Pentecostal. Today they make up two-thirds to three quarters of the region's Protestant population.²⁷ For Pentecostals and Evangelicals alike, the question of identity marks the difference. It is important to understand that identification with Protestant Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism in Argentina means making a conscious decision at being different from the mainstream of society. It means following certain moral behavior rejecting the decadence of Western ways. There is also a difference in regard to patterns of participation. Though Argentina claims to be over 90% Catholic, there are more Protestants in attendance on a given Sunday than Roman Catholics.

When Paul wrote his letters he referred to the "saints" in Ephesus, Philippi, or Colossae (Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:1). By "saints" he was referring to the "different one," the ones whose lifestyles, spirit of love and commitment to Christ set them apart from others. Protestant Christians in the River Plate, from Juan Thomson's time to today, have striven to forge an identity that sets them apart, that marks them as "saints." In an age of moral turmoil that is indeed good news.

NOTES

¹ Wade Crawford Barclay, *The Methodist Episcopal Church 1845-1939*, Volume Three, "Widening Horizons: 1845-95," in *History of Methodist Missions In Six Volumes* (New York: The Board of Missions of The Methodist Church, 1957), p. 767.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Tourist Guide to Missionary Institutions and Religious Services in English in the Chief Cities of Latin America* (New York: Interdenominational Committee on the Religious Needs of Anglo-American Communities Abroad, 1915), pp. 44-45.

⁴ Daniel P. Monti, *Ubicación del Metodismo en el Río de la Plata* (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 1976), p. 27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁶ Thomson himself uses this term to describe what happened, "renacido bajo el ministerio del Dr. Goodfellow . . ." in "Reminiscencias," in *El Estandarte Evangélico de Sud América: Número de Jubileo*, Director and Editor: Daniel Hall (Rosario: Imprenta Metodista, 1911), p. 47. Hereafter this collection will be cited as *Número del Jubileo*.

⁷ Guillermo Tallon, "El Metodismo en Sud América, 1836-1911," in "Número de Jubileo," op. cit., p. 26.

⁸ Thomson, "Número del Jubileo," op. cit., p. 47.

⁹ "Dissidents" was the name given by Roman Catholics to Protestants in Argentina. Although meant as a term of derision, the Protestants appropriated the title with pride. Over the Protestant cemetery in Rosario, the entrance-way still reads, "The Dissident Cemetery."

¹⁰ Monti, op. cit., p. 37. Translated by the author.

¹¹ Piquinela, op. cit., p. 4.

¹² The late Carlos T. Gattinoni was the first Bishop of the autonomous Argentine Evangelical Methodist Church. He shared his first-hand testimony of hearing Thomson in a personal conversation with the author in 1985.

¹³ Monti, op. cit., p. 37.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Bishop Thomas B. Wood, "Letter to Dr. Peck," dated November 13, 1893. From the United Methodist Archives Center, Drew University.

¹⁶ Daniel P. Monti, *Presencia del Protestantismo en el Rio de la Plata durante el Siglo XIX* (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 1969), p. 119.

¹⁷ Juan F. Thomson, "Reminiscencias," in *Número de Jubileo*, op. cit., pp. 49, 51. My translation.

¹⁸ "Número del Jubileo," op. cit., p. 60.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Rev. Francis G. Penzotti, "Spiritual Victories in Latin America: Mr. Penzotti's Autobiography," *Centennial Pamphlet No. 16* (New York: American Bible Society, 1916), p. 8.

²¹ Ibid., p. 9.

²² Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 461.

²³ Ibid., p. 106, 51.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 126-127. Quote translated by the author.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 154.

²⁶ Dafne Sabanes Plou, "Evangelical Party Established in Argentina," in *Latinamerica Press*, Vol. 23, No. 29, August 5, 1991, p. 3.

²⁷ "Pentecostal Movement," in *Latinamerica Press*, Vol. 23, No. 43, November 21, 1991, p. 3.