A short history of the Latin American Biblical University
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In the mid nineteenth century and beginnings of the twentieth, a new evangelistic fervor appeared in Great Britain. Missionary efforts extended to various parts of the globe. The Regions Beyond Missionary Union (RBMU) is one of several initiatives that arrives to Latin America. To some extent, the evangelistic work in this part of the continent was already in progress. Dr. James Thompson had arrived to Buenos Aires in 1818 and, although his work was primarily with the British and Foreign Bible Society, he was not involved in planting churches. The couple Henry and Susan Strachan arrive to Argentina under the auspices of the RBMU, where they carry out evangelistic work between 1904 and 1918. During this time, two important missionary congresses were held: Edinburgh Missionary Conference, in 1910 and Congress on Christian Work in Latin America, Panama, 1916. These and future conferences took place in the context of the evangelistic work in the region.

At some point during their stay in Argentina, the idea of a continent-wide evangelism begins to germinate in the minds of this couple. In 1918 the Strachans travel to the United States, where, after several attempts, they manage to get the needed support and they resign from their mission agency. An exploratory trip, which includes Costa Rica, provides the Strachans with the information that allows them to make a final decision. They choose San José, Costa Rica as their center of operations. On July 24, 1921, a group of interested friends meets on the campus of Stony Brook School and forms the Latin American Evangelization Campaign (LAEC), which later becomes Latin American Mission (LAM). As the name indicates, their objective is the evangelization of Latin America. Once the family is settled in San José, Henry Strachen, together with Juan Varetto, initiates the campaign. Susan Strachan takes responsibility for the San José part of the missionary project.

This evangelistic ministry requires the preparation of human resources to support the effort. During their exploratory trip, the Strachan discovered that there were no seminaries in Central America and that there was a great need for national and foreign workers. Part of this need would be met by training local leaders. As a trial run, on October 2, 1922, the first class of the Training School for Young Women is offered. The first students are eight young women. Shortly afterwards, a group of ten men are incorporated. In March 1923 the Costa Rican Bible Institute (IBCR) formally opens. On July 27, 1924, the building is dedicated. The highlight of 1926 was the first graduation from the
Bible Institute, consisting only of women, who were immediately integrated into the missionary work in Central America.

In the 1930’s, the Institute progressed well. There were a good number of professors and students. Beginning in 1923, 93 students had arrived, representing 13 countries. The evangelistic campaigns of Henry Strachan in the period 1921-1939 had impacted the growth of the Latin American Protestant churches. In 1941 the IBCR was transformed into the Latin American Biblical Seminary (SBL), a step which also raised the academic quality. When Susan died in 1950, her son R. Kenneth Strachan became the General Director of the Mission. From 1950 to 1958, he was also involved in evangelism. Billy Graham’s evangelistic crusade in the Caribbean marked the climax of this era. On November 22, 1958, the Seminario Bíblico Latinoamericano inaugurated its second building (which was recently demolished).

In the early 1960’s, Latin America was experiencing economic, political and social changes. In the Latin American church, several concerns were surfacing that, with time, would gain a clear definition. Beginning in 1948, a number of conferences were held and some movements were started that would influence the church in the region. These includes: CELA (I, II, III), UNELAM, ISAL, CELADEC, and CELAM II. Vatican II showed some openness and invited several Protestant observers. This movement that bubbled in the region in the 1960’s would become relevant for the church and would eventually lead to the development of Latin American Theology. The Protestant intellectuals in Church and Society in Latin America (ISAL), were to some extent the first Latin American theologians. In the mid-50’s, some SBL professors had studied in Princeton, a seminary with a broader theological perspective. Soon afterwards, other SBL professors would study in European theological institutions, which would also contribute to the development of the theological thought of the institution. By this time, the faculty included Latin American professors.

In 1971 LAM granted autonomy to its major ministries, including the Seminario Bíblico Latinoamericano. A few years later, the Seminary decided to focus on Latin American theology. In the 40’s, 50’s and 60’s, it offered correspondence courses. This was a program directed to a individual student, but was not at the same level as the on-campus courses. In 1976 the SBL launched PRODIADIS (Programa Diversificado a Distancia). This was theological education by extension, which aimed to provide formation to students located in different countries of the region, who by other means would not have been able to study because of their job, family responsibilities and financial limitations, that would make it impossible for them to move to another country. PRODIADIS was equivalent academically to the courses offered in San José. These two programs eventually merged into one, with the full support of the various organizations in the region, which later became known as satellites (recintos). In 1997 the Seminario Bíblico became the Universidad Bíblica Latinoamericana (UBL), with accreditation from the state regulatory agency, CONESUP. Two years later it was moved to a new location, with a significant improvement in the physical plant.
Certainly, from its founding the institution has experienced major transformations. The theology of the region is not the same as it was. Latin America has passed through significant political, economic, and social changes that have left its marks on the church. The UBL believes that it is not sufficient only to evangelize people; it is also necessary to deal with the social injustices that produce certain political and economic models. This is clearly visible in the Affirmation of Faith and Commitment of 1974 and the Declaration of the Faculty of the Latinamerican Biblical Seminary to the Christian Churches of Latin America in 1979. The UBL considers it necessary to prepare students who can approach theology in a critical and interdisciplinary way. For this goal, it has a highly qualified faculty, who engage in both teaching and research. This permits the institution to provide its own bibliographic resources. Finally, the primary purpose of the Universidad Bíblica Latinoamericana is to continue being a valuable resource for the Latin American churches.