

Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African American Pentecostalism

A review of *Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African American Pentecostalism* by Estrelida Y. Alexander (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011. 406 pp., ISBN 978-0830825868) by Eric R. Jackson (jacksoner@nku.edu), Associate Professor of History, Department of History and Geography; Black Studies Program, Northern Kentucky University.

During the past fifteen years, many scholars have been focusing their analyses on the origin and nature of the Holiness and Pentecostal movements in the United States as well as worldwide. Under review here is one such study, Estrelida Y. Alexander's *Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African American Pentecostalism*. Raised in an urban, African American working-class community during the 1950s and 1960s, Alexander knew very little about her Christian heritage. But upon acquiring her doctorate, she decided to investigate this topic with much vigor and passion. The outcome of her venture is this powerful and path-breaking volume that provides readers with a unique perspective on the history and impact of the African American charismatic Pentecostal movement. Specifically, Alexander claims that the origins of this movement "not just for African American but for white Pentecostals as well lie within a robust African spirituality with its beliefs in a supreme being, in the sacredness of creation, in the supernatural, in rituals of life and in ancestor veneration" (p. 7). Furthermore, the author locates the inception of the movement within the African/African American religious tradition during the enslavement period that contained a variety of vernaculars such as oral traditions, music, dancing, spiritual visions, and speaking in tongue. Finally, Alexander highlights the important roles of several nineteenth-century African American Holiness ministers, played in this religious crusade, such as William Christian, Charles Price, and William J. Seymour and also seeks to illustrate how African American Pentecostalism has become a major force in the development of charismatic Christianity in America as well as internationally.

In the first three chapters, Alexander highlights the origin of the Pentecostal movement, and its link to African spirituality, the legacy of the nineteenth century African American Holiness Movement, and the impact of William J. Seymour and the Azusa Street Revival on the entire Pentecostal crusade nationwide. Within these pages, the author contends that until recently, because of the presence of various racial prejudice notions and racism itself within this aspect of our nation's religious history, very few people have any knowledge of the important role the African American religious experience played on the inception, growth, and current state of the Pentecostal movement in the United States and abroad.

Alexander next examines numerous subjects such as the histories of various important Black American Pentecostal churches (and their pastors) in the United States during the early 1900s, the impact of the concept of “Black oneness Pentecostalism” on these and many other African American churches, the racial divide that emerged in the overall Pentecostal movement throughout the nation, and the important role of African American women in spreading the Pentecostal faith. According to the author, all these topics led to both an overwhelming spirit of unity as well as intense divisions, based on the concepts of race and gender, that one could trace back to the Azusa Street Revival of 1906.

Finally Alexander's book ends with a brief analysis of the current state and theological challenges the African American Pentecostal movement faces today. More specifically, the author notes that “what is most distinctive about African American Pentecostalism today is the variety of modes of expression that it developed over the course of its history – much of it fueled by schism[s] within its ranks” (p. 393).

Black Fire is a meticulously researched and lucidly-written piece of outstanding scholarship. It is a riveting analysis that students and scholars alike will appreciate on so many levels, especially in the areas of race, gender, class, and generational differences. For these points alone, the author should be commended. The only minor shortcoming of the volume is that more attention (more than one chapter) could have been paid to the important role African American women played in the history of the African American Pentecostal crusade in our nation. However, despite this slight problem, this exceptional study helps to fill a large gap in both American and African American religious history as well as provides much needed insight to a subject most relevant to most people of faith.