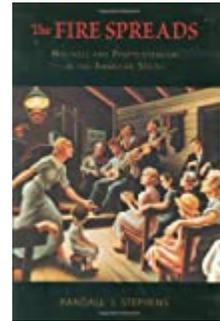




**Randall J. Stephens.** *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008. xi + 393 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02672-8.



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## **Pentecostalism as Regional and Trans-Regional Religion**

In 1906, a holiness preacher named G. B. Cashwell attended an interracial revival on Azusa Street in Los Angeles. Convinced of William J. Seymour's message of sanctification, the young and energetic southern preacher returned to his home in North Carolina and introduced black and white men and women to their own experience of "Pentecost" and "gifts of tongues." Though exceptional for its high level of attendance and publicity, Cashwell's popular revival, historian Randall J. Stephens quickly points out, was no accident, for the simple reason that the "roots of pentecostalism and holiness" had already reached deep into the fertile religious soil of southern culture during the nineteenth century (p. 7). *The Fire Spreads* tells the story of the process by which Wesleyan doctrines of holiness filtered through the Mason-Dixon Line and made it possible for many southerners to reject mainline Protestant denominationalism and embrace "the ecstatic new movement" of pentecostalism (p. 11). Issues of race, class, gender, and politics come into focus as Stephens eloquently, entertainingly, and engagingly situates the development of pentecostalism within the regional context of the American South from the nineteenth century to the present.

Stephens begins *The Fire Spreads* with an admission that the American South was not the birthplace of holiness and pentecostalism, despite the fact that today over fifty different pentecostal groups base their headquarters in the region. The basic purpose of the book, therefore, is to explain how an upstart evangelical sect imported from the North could become one of the most influential and pervasive forms of Protestantism in the contemporary South. In his introduction, Stephens carefully describes the basic tenets of holiness and early pentecostalism, which included conversion and salvation, entire sanctification, gifts of the Holy Spirit, and premillennialism. He also stresses the "conflict, dissent, and antagonism [that] marked both early movements," due in large part to their association with perfectionist revivals in the North, interracial revivals in the West, and the first holiness adherents in the South, who Stephens describes as "anonymous zealots on the cultural fringes of society" (pp. 7, 4).

Chapter 1, "Angels from the North," describes how the "intersectional and interdenominational" contours of the Second Great Awakening generated opposition to a

prevalent strain of Calvinism in the South that “maintained a pessimism about humankind that seriously inhibited perfectionism” (pp. 18, 25). This sort of hyper-Calvinism, according to Stephens, existed largely because of the commitment of white southerners to slavery and a rigid code of honor. Not surprisingly, the perfectionist theology of Phoebe Palmer and other northern Methodists most influenced African Americans and white women of the South.

In the following chapter, “Holiness Strangers in a Southern Zion,” Stephens delineates the ways in which an “indigenous leadership” gradually accommodated “the prickly message and manners of holiness folk” to a larger southern constituency between 1880 and 1900 (pp. 52, 57). Stephens characterizes holiness adherents as “fiercely independent populists” and “religious mavericks” who were “ill at ease in a southern evangelical Zion” (p. 57). In his elaboration of the interracial and transregional dimensions of the holiness movement, Stephens also initiates a very interesting discussion of how “southern holiness people embraced translocalism and distanced themselves from the Lost Cause,” not to mention their tendency to challenge “the shibboleths of southern racism” (pp. 81, 89).

Chapter 3, “The Words of God Spread South,” and chapter 4, “Signs of the Second Coming,” illustrate the methods by which holiness people convinced many southerners of the legitimacy of their beliefs and practices at the turn of the century. To demonstrate such inroads, Stephens highlights the grassroots publication of holiness literature and the resultant communication of “the language and style of holiness” to a wider southern audience (p. 104). Premillennialism—the belief that the ills of society warranted the return of Jesus Christ before the millennium—was a common feature of this holiness literary culture. The adoption of such “a negative, apocalyptic, and otherworldly theology” by white holiness adherents represented “a threat to religious order and denominational authority” as understood by mainline Protestants (pp. 138, 139). The belief in supernatural acts of divine healing, retribution, and fire baptism followed in this line of negative eschatological thinking, though Stephens admits that African Americans tended not to dwell as much on the End Times.

Stephens identifies Seymour’s Azusa Street revival as “instrumental in the spread of pentecostalism into the South” in the next chapter, “The Emergence of Southern Pentecostalism” (p. 191). Southern holiness people were especially attracted to Seymour’s tongues speech and message of the last days. They were not, according

to Stephens, influenced on any large scale by the ideas and reputation of Charles Fox Parham and his comparatively small followings in Kansas and Texas. Stephens astutely situates the early pentecostal movement within social and cultural contexts, which, in turn, shed light on the way converts challenged gender, racial, class, and political divisions. Serious conflicts developed between new pentecostals and an assortment of other southern holiness, Baptist, and Methodist peoples, which led A. J. Tomlinson, one of the first leaders of the Church of God (Cleveland), to remark, “The Fire is spreading for miles and miles in every direction” (p. 227).

*The Fire Spreads* ends with a chronological sprint through the history of pentecostalism in the twentieth century. It is the story of how 32,000 pentecostal Americans in 1916 turned into 350,000 in 1936 and 11 million in 2000, a majority of them living in the South. It is also a story of the accommodation of pentecostal adherents to middle-class norms, conservative politics, superpatriotism, and racial division, as well as a story of “black and white, urban and rural, impoverished and well off” southerners (p. 264). Famous Pentecostals, like T. D. Jakes, Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley, Pat Robertson, and John Hagee, take center stage in Stephens’s final chapter entitled “The Eagle Soars,” named after the title of a song written and performed by the pentecostal attorney general John Ashcroft. Indeed, what was once a grassroots movement composed of “religious mavericks ... moved slowly into the mainstream of American evangelicalism,” but not without sustaining their beliefs in tongues speech, sanctification, and the Second Coming (p. 281).

This study is an important addition to the growing field of pentecostal studies. Stephens’s emphasis on regional identity complements the previous works of historians like Grant Wacker and Edith Blumhofer. His ability to make sense of the complex theological features of pentecostalism makes *The Fire Spreads* accessible to a wide audience composed of lay adult readers, college students, pentecostal practitioners, and professional historians. Furthermore, there is something to be said for a book that is both deeply intelligent and highly readable. Though Stephens certainly discusses the role of African Americans in the development of pentecostalism, *The Fire Spreads* is largely about white southerners and their involvement in the movement of a fringe religious group into the mainstream of evangelical Protestantism. Anyone interested in the history of religion in the United States—and specifically as it relates to region, race, and politics—must read Stephens’s *The Fire Spreads*.

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