

Estrela Alexander. *Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African American Pentecostalism.* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011. 406 pp. \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8308-2586-8.



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Considering the prevalence of Pentecostalism within the African American community and the number of black leaders who have influenced the development of Pentecostal traditions, the scarcity of academic work focusing on African American Pentecostal history is stunning. Very few monographs have been published on this topic. To begin filling this glaring gap in the literature, Estrela Alexander set out to write a comprehensive history of African American Pentecostalism since the very beginning of the movement in *Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African American Pentecostalism*.

The author begins the book with her most controversial claim in a chapter that is subtitled "Pentecostal Retentions from African Spirituality" (p. 28). Here, Alexander weighs in on a debate that has been going on for decades about the extent to which Africans were able to preserve aspects of their indigenous cultures while enslaved in North America. Although Alexander is clear that African cultures are diverse and that the mere presence of similarities between African traditions and Pentecostalism does not allow us to draw a direct line of influence between the two, she nonetheless maintains that there is an "African understanding of reality" that is fundamentally different from European worldviews, that this understanding is found in Pentecostalism, and that

it helps to explain the appeal of Pentecostalism among early African American converts (p. 30). This "African understanding" includes belief in a supreme God who is active in our lives, a respect for ancestors, a willingness to embrace leadership from women, and the use of song and dance in religious practice. After discussing many of these similarities, Alexander goes on to describe the diversity of African American Pentecostalism. Although scholars often fail to differentiate between Pentecostal, holiness, and charismatic traditions and pay even less attention to distinctions within each of these movements, Alexander illustrates how these traditions differ while also considering how they have influenced each other. She includes chapters that discuss the role of the black holiness movement in the development of African American Pentecostalism, the influence of the Azusa Street Revival, the relationship between white and black Pentecostals, the role of women, and theological differences between Pentecostal traditions. These chapters include discussions of less-known figures and denominations, and these details, along with Alexander's focus on many of the subtle theological differences between Trinitarian and Oneness groups, encourage the reader to consider how Pentecostalism developed as a distinct movement and the diversity within the tradition. This focus on di-

versity is a major contribution of this work and will certainly provide a useful starting point for scholars who are interested in particular individuals or denominations.

The breadth of this book is impressive, and, by choosing to cover all of African American Pentecostal history in one text, the author took on an enormous task. This work covers a broad topic over a hundred years, and Alexander clearly wanted to focus on the diversity found within the tradition. As a result of trying to cover so much information, the book does end up reading like an encyclopedia at times. For example, after making an argument about how influential African American women were during the Azusa Street Revival, Alexander goes on to list and to provide short accounts of four influential black women who were connected to the revival. She then goes on to do the same for a number of other black women who were leaders in different denominations and communities. The author takes a similar approach by listing and describing Trinitarian and Oneness African American denominations and traditionally white denominations with significant African American mem-

berships. These additions are certainly useful and provide the reader with important information about people and groups that are often overlooked, but they could easily become overwhelming for readers who are more interested in Alexander's broader arguments.

Overall, this book will provide its readers with a valuable overview of important moments and figures from the past one hundred years. It presents a straightforward account of how African American Pentecostalism developed and changed over time. Because of the scope of this work, it will be helpful for general audiences who want to learn more about this topic or for use in an undergraduate course, but much of it is not thesis driven and will be of less interest to scholars already familiar with many of the people and groups Alexander discusses. Although Alexander makes a number of contributions with this book, her primary arguments seem to be that African Americans have been important to the history of Pentecostalism and that Pentecostal traditions are diverse and dynamic, and she does a very nice job of proving these points.

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