

Estrelida Y. Alexander, *Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African American Pentecostalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011).

In *Black Fire*, Estrelida Alexander, visiting professor of theology at Regent University Divinity School and executive director of the William J. Seymour Educational Foundation, constructs a grand narrative that interprets the origins and theological perspectives of various African American Pentecostal and Charismatic denominations. She describes not only the distinctives, but also the connections (organizational, doctrinal, and ritual) between them. In chapters five and six, she describes the origins and theologies of various Trinitarian and Oneness denominations. In chapter nine, she does the same with neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. She also provides charts that show the organizational connections of numerous denominations to their parent bodies (204-206, 246-248, 390).

Alexander's *Black Fire* is an ambitious, but sincerely motivated, project to create a comprehensive one-volume source on the history of African American Pentecostalism. However, the book does not exhibit mastery of the many details associated with an undertaking of this nature. I have read Alexander's book with special attention to statements about the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), with which I am most familiar. The book presents conflicting and incorrect dates that are given for the founding of COGIC (173, 204). COGIC was established first as a holiness denomination in 1897 and later reorganized as a

Pentecostal denomination in 1907. The book incorrectly cites the years 1877 and 1896 for COGIC's formation. The book incorrectly reports that women constitute the majority of delegates to COGIC's general and jurisdictional assemblies (318). The truth is that women do not make up the overall majority of delegates; women are the majority in only one class of delegates and that is the lay delegates. The largest number of delegates continues to be ordained ministers, who are predominately male.

While Alexander appropriately criticizes COGIC's incoherent position on women's ordination, her book profiles past women pastors in COGIC's history and yet does not provide current information on the identities of the increasing number of women pastors in COGIC. The book incorrectly reports that Gilbert E. Patterson was the grandson of C.H. Mason, the founder of COGIC (187). Gilbert Patterson's relation to Mason was through J.O. Patterson, Sr., an uncle, who was married to one of Mason's daughters. The terms "grandfather" and "grandson" are normally restricted to direct biological relations. There is no direct biological relation between C.H. Mason and Gilbert Patterson. It is possible that persons who have substantial knowledge about other denominations will also detect errors, as they shall appear in the book, about these denominations. For example, some persons may notice that the House of the Lord Church, which is appropriately classified as a Oneness denomination, is listed and described (perhaps by mistake) in chapter five with Trinitarian denominations (197, 248). While these and other factual errors do not undermine Alexander's project,

they are very distracting to readers already having familiarity with the histories of the groups and biographies of persons mentioned in the book.

Black Fire represents not only Alexander's attempt to address the problem of race, that is the neglect of African American Pentecostal and Charismatic movements by religious historians and, possibly worse, the racial divide among Pentecostals, but also her concern to tell the history of African American Pentecostalism with attention to gender and the problem of sexism. Throughout the book, she documents the role of African American woman in Pentecostal and Charismatic movements and denominations. However, she devotes chapter eight to a fuller treatment of African American women's leadership in these movements and denominations.

In chapters two, three, and four, Alexander points to African spirituality, the Holiness movement, and Azusa revival as sources of and influences on African American Pentecostalism. Her treatment of the Holiness movement and Azusa revival raises no controversy, but her claim about African spirituality does. Alexander asserts that black Pentecostalism is rooted in African spirituality (16, 28-29, 44-56). She points to several parallels (in music, song, dance, spirit possession, healing, and openness to women's leadership) between black Pentecostalism and African indigenous religions (30, 56-59). She admits that these connections are only indirect and largely based on analogy (30, 59). Beyond this admission, more needs to be said about which paradigms of African American

historiography are suitable for the study of black Pentecostalism.

The study and writing of black Pentecostalism after Alexander's *Black Fire* will have to look more closely at large-scale patterns in the history and culture of the United States for discernment of a broader range of influences on African American Pentecostalism. Too often revisionist histories of African Americans have emphasized African culture as an ultimate source and explanation of black culture in America and portrayed black culture as a counter-culture impervious to other influences. The practice of racial separation (legalized and customary) and minority experiences of national events may have more impact on African American religious life than direct or indirect influences from African religions from long ago. Alexander regards *Black Fire* as a "meager beginning" and thinks that the work of revision will take years to complete (13). This future work may be aided by critiques of African American historiography such as Wilson J. Moses's *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* (1998) and William D. Wright's *Critical Reflections on Black History* (2002) and *Black History and Black Identity: A Call for a New Historiography* (2002).

In chapter ten, Alexander concludes that there is no monolithic black Pentecostalism (393). *Black Fire* shows clearly that black Pentecostalism has grown into a large movement largely through frequent splintering. Alexander sees as a challenge the task of interpreting and building unity among the persons and groups that comprise this movement (395). This indeed is a challenge for the practitioners of black Pentecostalism.

For scholars seeking to write the history of black Pentecostalism, the challenge centers on the development of critical historiography that is inclusive of those aspects of African Americans' experiences which are omitted or suppressed in the ideologically driven paradigm for black historical studies.

Reviewed by Frederick Ware
Howard University School of Divinity