DOMESTICATING THE SPIRIT:  
ELDIN VILLAFÁNE’S THE LIBERATING SPIRIT:  
TOWARD AN HISPANIC AMERICAN PENTECOSTAL SOCIAL ETHIC

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In The Liberating Spirit, Eldin Villafáne seeks to fill a gap both in Pentecostal thinking and in the field of social ethics. More specifically, he strives to delineate a social ethic from and for the Hispanic American Pentecostal Church, and in so doing to call this church away from its overemphasis on the individual into a wider arena of social struggle (pp. xii-xiii, 201-202). To do this, Villafáne correlates a sociological reading of Hispanic American communities with a Pentecostal understanding of the gospel and the activity of the Spirit. He seeks to produce a work ‘that coheres with the experience of a poor and oppressed minority-sect church in the USA, with its cultural heritage, and consistent with Hispanic American Pentecostalism’s self-understanding of ethics emerging from its experience of the Spirit’ (p. 222). These three elements—poverty and oppression, Hispanic cultural identity, and experience of the Spirit—are interwoven throughout the book by means of

* Stanley Hauerwas (PhD, Yale University), Professor of Theological Ethics of the Divinity School, Duke University, is perhaps the premier American ethicist on the scene today. His work in virtue ethics and the role of narrative in Christian community has yielded a provocative and engaging analysis of modern culture—one that has had wide impact not only in theological circles but in the larger academy as well. Known for his appreciation for the counter-cultural, even sectarian, expressions of Christian faith, Professor Hauerwas is a fitting respondent to this first full-scale effort to articulate a Pentecostal social ethic. He is joined in this response by one of his graduate students, Scott Saye.
both sociological and theological analyses. At times these correlations create provocative insights and proposals. But more often the separate inquiries seem to sit side by side like mismatched puzzle pieces, resisting integration into a unified vision. Perhaps this is part of the reason why at the end of the book Villafañé ends up sounding less like a Hispanic American Pentecostal and more like a mainline Protestant liberal.

In two ways Villafañé’s book makes an important contribution to current discussions in Christian social ethics. First, by taking seriously the particularity of his ecclesial identity, he reminds us that being an Hispanic American Pentecostal Christian means embodying the gospel in ways that challenge and critique both secular social structures and other Christian bodies. He points out five areas in which this church, because of its distinct social makeup, can provide a unique witness to the world. The first he calls Mestizaje (from the term ‘mestizo’ meaning ‘mixed’ or ‘hybrid’). As a ‘mixed’ church, integrating Spanish, African and Amerindian heritage, the Hispanic American Pentecostal Church embodies and witnesses to the shalom of the races—signs of the Reign (p. 198). Secondly, under the heading La Morenita (literally, ‘the brown lady’), Villafañé suggests that the importance of the virgin of Guadeloupe in the Hispanic church can contribute to a positive and liberating view of women. Thirdly, Migración, referring to the migration experience of most Hispanics, reflects their status both as a pilgrim people looking forward to the coming kingdom, and as a border people seeking to bridge the gap in the Western hemisphere between the affluent North and the suffering South. Menesterosos (‘the indigent, the poor and the oppressed’) names the reality of the Hispanic Pentecostal Church as a place where the poor and oppressed are liberated. Finally, Modelos Sociales refers to the fact that this church is itself a social model, displaying a new polity of resistance, liberation and reconciliation (pp. 198-99). In each of these five ways, Villafañé demonstrates how the cultural and historical identity of this people creates a certain embodiment of the church with a distinct story and social witness.

The second important contribution of The Liberating Spirit is its effort to produce a truly pneumatological ethic. Villafañé critiques the excessive Pentecostal emphasis on individual experience of the Spirit and calls attention to the social significance of the Spirit’s activity in Pentecostal worship (p. 195). The powerful work of the Spirit reminds us that social change is part of a wider cosmic struggle. To think about Christian social ethics, then, is to consider how the Spirit is at work