Gastón Espinosa


The history of Latina/o Pentecostalism in the US is a tale of residents and migrants seeking spiritual community and cultural identity. From the early beginnings of the Pentecostal movement in Azusa Street, there are ample evidences of Latina/o involvement in local, national, and transnational Pentecostal missionary efforts. Moreover, their continued labor and involvement in American Pentecostal denominations has made significant contributions to the overall history of the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement in the US and around the world. However, despite their ministerial involvement and faithfulness to a particular denomination, the Latina/o Pentecostal community has been relegated to the margins of US society and denominational leadership. Seeking to remedy the often-silenced history of the Latina/o Pentecostal experience in the US, and particularly within the Assemblies of God (AG), Gaston Espinosa weaves their story, contributions, and continued influence into the religious tapestry of the greater American Pentecostal narrative.

*Latino Pentecostals in America* traces the history of how this community has “struggled over the past 100 years to exercise voice, agency, and leadership in the Assemblies of God, in Latino Pentecostalism, and in American public life” (13). Although the title is somewhat misleading in that it alludes to a much broader constituency, Espinosa acknowledges it was the publisher’s predilection. It is nonetheless fitting for the book because the Latina/o AG experience serves as a great sample size for understanding the often comparable and at times similar wider Latina/o Pentecostal story. In broad brush strokes one could say that despite the diversity within Latina/o Pentecostal church bodies there is a common experience of being silenced, marginalized and limited in leadership advancement within those who are part of a larger denomination like the AG and the Church of God (Cleveland, TN).

The story told by Espinosa deliberately challenges some common stereotypes that have been held concerning Latino Pentecostals in general. In chapter one, Espinosa traces early accounts of the birth of Pentecostalism in the US at the turn of the twentieth century providing greater evidence for the participation of Latinas/os in the seminal leadership of the movement. This often-unmentioned presence of Latina/o converts and missionaries in the early period of the Pentecostal movement is a significant piece of historical recovery, which Espinosa painstakingly documents. Furthermore, he argues the presence and participation of Latina/o Pentecostals in the early days of the Azusa Street Revival helped to catapult the burgeoning biracial movement “into a multilingual, international, multiracial-ethnic revival” (406).
Focusing his study on the AG, chapters two and three challenge the often-uncontested notion that H.C. Ball was the lone pioneer and principal missionary of Latino AG missions and later churches in Texas. Though he led the Latino AG church for over twenty years, Ball was assisted by Mexican ministers like Rev. Isabel Flores and at times took credit for their endeavors. In reality, Espinosa argues Ball should be given credit more for his organizational and intermediary role with AG headquarters, but the work of Mexican ministers needs to be credited to them. In addition, as chapter four ("The Gringos have control") seeks to document, Espinosa argues it was due to the AG and Ball’s paternalistic ecclesial governance that Francisco Olazábal was not able to become the superintendent of the autonomous Mexican District he was elected to lead, and as a result he and the Mexican ministers who followed him broke off from the AG to form the first completely indigenous Protestant denomination with Latino leadership (the Latin American Council of Christian Churches). After this sad turn of affairs, chapter five and six narrate the struggles and phenomenal growth of the creation and progress of AG Latino Districts from one in 1956, to four in 1971, and currently to fourteen; remarkably from 65 congregations in 1930 to 2,665 in 2014!

After narrating the development of the Latino AG Districts, Espinosa steps back to tease out some important insights with regard to the evangelistic mission and social work that serves to present a more culturally engaged and politically informed version of Latino Pentecostalism. Chapter seven and eight explore the work of Juan Lugo and other native Puerto Ricans, the establishment of the Pentecostal Church of God (i.e. the Latino AG on the island), and its later breakaway from the AG General Counsel. Then, chapter nine traces the diasporic origins of the Pentecostal movement in Puerto Rico revealing illuminating tensions within Puerto Rican leaders in New York and the island, which were fueled by their nationalism. The last three chapters in the book critically explore the faith-based civic engagement of the Latino AG movement, hence the subtitle faith and politics in action. These socio-political dimensions are developed with regards to the role of women in ministry (chapter ten), their involvement in social justice via evangelistic work (chapter eleven), and their more recent organization and influence in the political arena (chapter twelve).

Anyone seeking a deeper understanding of Latina/o Pentecostalism in the US will be richly rewarded through a reading of this book. Carefully documented and elegantly argued, this book provides an exemplary approach for the much-needed histories that need to be written about other ecclesial Latina/o Pentecostal groups. If there is one complain about this book, it has to be the time it took for a work like this to come into existence. Moreover, one hundred years of Latino AG history demand for more works to investigate