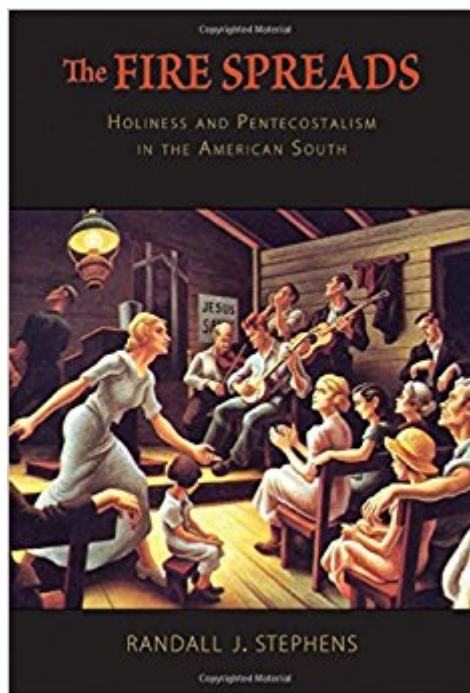




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# The Fire Spreads: Holiness And Pentecostalism In The American South



## Synopsis

Today pentecostalism claims nearly 500 million followers worldwide. An early stronghold was the American South, where believers spoke in unknown tongues, worshipped in free-form churches, and broke down social barriers that had long divided traditional Protestants. Thriving denominations made their headquarters in the region and gathered white and black converts from the Texas plains to the Carolina low country. Pentecostalism was, in fact, a religious import. It came to the South following the post-Civil War holiness revival, a northern-born crusade that emphasized sinlessness and religious empowerment. Adherents formed new churches in the Jim Crow South and held unconventional beliefs about authority, power, race, and gender. Such views set them at odds with other Christians in the region. By 1900 nearly all southern holiness folk abandoned mainline churches and adopted a pessimistic, apocalyptic theology. Signs of the last days, they thought, were all around them. The faith first took root among anonymous religious zealots. It later claimed southern celebrities and innovators like televangelists Oral Roberts, Jimmy Swaggart, T. D. Jakes, and John Hagee; rock-and-roll icons Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Little Richard; and, more recently, conservative political leaders such as John Ashcroft. With the growth of southern pentecostal denominations and the rise of new, affluent congregants, the movement moved cautiously into the evangelical mainstream. By the 1980s the once-apolitical faith looked entirely different. Many still watched and waited for spectacular signs of the end. Yet a growing number did so as active political conservatives.

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## Customer Reviews

Stephens reveals the pentecostal and holiness movement's 'restless visionaries' to be complicated religious figures pressing at the margins of southern society, undeterred by frequent scandals and internecine disputes, traveling constantly, delighting in acts of persecution, and testing the boundaries of religious ecstasies. An essential book for anyone interested in twentieth-century religious history. (Paul Harvey, University of Colorado at Colorado Springs) Randall Stephens' book represents sedulous research, balanced judgment, and impressive imagination. It stands as a work of exceptional importance in the rapidly developing fields of holiness, pentecostal, and southern cultural and religious history. (Grant Wacker, Duke University) One of the few essential books about American holiness and pentecostal religion. Randall Stephens explains the nineteenth-century northern roots of southern pentecostalism and displays the growth, creativity, and arguments of the various pentecostal groups in the twentieth-century south. (Ted Ownby, University of Mississippi) A classic study of the first region in the world where Pentecostalism took root as a mass movement. Excellent and readable. I highly recommend it. (Vinson Synan, author of *The Holiness/Pentecostal Movement in the United States*) In this careful and detailed study, Stephens chronicles the rise of Holiness and Pentecostal movements in the American South in the late 19th century, discusses their eventual split and quarrels about theology and culture, and then recounts the gradual mainstreaming of both movements in the late 20th century. (Publishers Weekly 2007-10-29) Boisterous Pentecostal worship has excited the scorn of skeptics, while apocalyptic Pentecostal theology has scandalized the orthodox. But Stephens limns a pattern of phenomenal growth for this revolutionary faith, now curiously central to the conservatism of the Religious Right. A balanced work of cultural scholarship. (Bryce Christensen Booklist) Stephens's masterful account of how the South nurtured and altered a once-marginalized religious movement--and how that religion influenced the region--is the most fluent and authoritative synthesis of a complex and controversial subject. (The Atlantic 2008-05-01) 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... 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*. (Michael Pasquier H-Pentecostalism 2008-04-01) Crisply written, analytically clear,

and full of colorful personalities, *The Fire Spreads* is the most significant study of Pentecostal origins since Grant Wacker's *Heaven Below*... Randall Stephens offers a rich portrait of Christians in the American South who embraced perfectionist teachings. Mining untapped pamphlets, periodicals, diaries, and church records, he presents a lucid chronological and regional study of the holiness and Pentecostal movements that eventually dominated the national perception of southern religion. Himself the grandson of a "barnstorming holiness preacher," Stephens chronicles the many ironies that led to this unexpected triumph. (John G. Turner Books & Culture 2008-05-01) The growth of the holiness and Pentecostal movements in the late-19th and early-20th-century South is the focus of this engaging work, the most extensive such treatment to date. (W. B. Bedford Choice 2008-08-01) In *The Fire Spreads* Randall J. Stephens gives a historical account of the genesis of Pentecostalism in the USA, which treads delicately through the contradictions. He provides a strikingly imaginative account of riotous religious competition, above all in the American South. (David Martin Times Literary Supplement 2008-09-17) In *The Fire Spreads* Randall Stephens puts the Pentecostal tradition in the South in a broad historical perspective in a masterfully researched and well-written book. (Hans Krabbendam Church History and Religious Culture 2008-10-01)

Stephens reveals the pentecostal and holiness movement's 'restless visionaries' to be complicated religious figures pressing at the margins of southern society, undeterred by frequent scandals and internecine disputes, traveling constantly, delighting in acts of persecution, and testing the boundaries of religious ecstasies. An essential book for anyone interested in twentieth-century religious history. (Paul Harvey, University of Colorado at Colorado Springs) --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This is that rare scholarly book and is engaging and lively. The author has clearly taken unusual pains to write the story, as well as communicate the facts. The book is also authoritative and is taking its place as the definitive source on this topic.

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