

Book Review

The Assemblies of God: Godly Love and the Revitalization of American Pentecostalism

Margaret M. Poloma and John C. Green

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This important work examines the various currents of renewal, tradition, and culture within the Assemblies of God, USA (AG). Margaret Poloma and John Green have provided readers with an accurate, critical, sympathetic, and insightful work that will help leaders and members of AG churches understand the blessings and tensions of being Assemblies of God in the twenty-first century.

Three main ideas anchor the qualitative and quantitative sociological research. First, Pentecostalism, in general, and the AG, in particular, has always had both “primitive” and “pragmatic” approaches to encounters with the Lord and evangelization of the lost. Second, the authors uphold the notion of Godly Love, which they define as “dynamic interaction between divine and human love that enlivens and expands benevolence.” In other words, at the heart of the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer’s life is the Great Commandment to love God and neighbor. Third, the authors adhere to the idea that the “primal” experiences of revival and renewal become “routinized,” and Pentecostal experiences—especially speaking in tongues and other public manifestations (1 Corinthians 12-14)—diminish over time.

The good news at the end of their work is that the Assemblies of God, USA has not lost all of its revival fire; however, they present significant concerns about what

being “Pentecostal” means to twenty-first-century AG adherents and leaders.

Poloma and Green conducted focus groups, interviews, and surveys of various AG churches with the full cooperation of many AG leaders, from National Office Executive Team members to local pastors. Their methods are empirically sound. While some critics may find their categories too broad or narrow, they do recognize the currents that impact AG experience and identity. They surveyed twenty-one congregations, placing each within one of four categories: (1) “traditional” (speaking in tongues is normative, public manifestations are welcome and Pentecostal identity are paramount), (2) “evangelical AG” (officially Pentecostal and doctrinally in order, but in practice closer to vibrant, non-Pentecostal churches); (3) “renewalist” (actively seeking and participating in broader charismatic movements); and (4) “alternative” (sometimes affiliated with “emergent” and “seeker-sensitive” groups; the keys are creativity and cutting-edge expressions).

The authors express concern that the dynamic of early Pentecostal days has become routine and barely more than a memory for many congregations. They even wonder if, in today’s therapeutic culture of late-modern America, charismata have been taken from the church. They highlight Eric Patterson’s concern that in a few decades

American Pentecostalism will be completely subsumed in a vaguely evangelical “pot of goo.”

Over 70 percent of AG pastors agree that Pentecostal distinctives, including the baptism in the Spirit with the initial physical evidence of speaking in tongues and the public practice of the manifestations of the Spirit, are in decline. At the same time, most leaders surveyed expressed that Pentecostal identity was important to their ministry and their church’s mission. Clearly, there are challenges here.

Two trends in the broader evangelical and renewal worlds affect the overall picture as well. One is the experience of revival/renewal with manifestations among Charismatics and Pentecostals without an emphasis on Spirit-baptism and the evidence of tongues. The other is the embrace of supernatural experiences, including deliverance, healing, and spiritual gifts among evangelicals as a whole.

Cessationists (those who believe that 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 manifestations were only a first-century jumpstart for the Early Church and are no longer legitimate) are a dwindling percentage of Western evangelicals and almost non-existent in the Majority world. The Assemblies of God and other “classical” Pentecostal denominations and movements no longer have the franchise on certain charismas.

AG organization, from the local church to the National Office, is not seen as an impediment to renewal, but the nature of complex administrative and cooperative

functions creates challenges for the Fellowship. Informal, relational networks will continue to grow, while current structures are evaluated for effectiveness. The authors see past and present AG leaders as self-aware, cautiously optimistic, and deeply committed to Pentecostal experience, identity, and values.

This research confirms other surveys concerning the need for Assemblies of God congregants to personally experience Spirit baptism and continue to walk in the joy of praise and prayer with tongues. Poloma and Green highlight the work of Vanguard University Professor Frank Macchia, especially his book, *Baptized in the Spirit: Toward a Global Pentecostal Theology*, as a guide for renewing interest in the core distinctive of the Assemblies of God and linking the baptism in the Spirit with both assurance of God’s love and anointing for world evangelization.

This book offers much information for careful reflection. Many leaders will probably classify their congregations as a mix of two or more of Poloma and Green’s categories.

As the authors summarize their findings, they are cautiously optimistic about future renewal in the AG. Their research directly links powerful encounters with God, including Spirit-baptism and other ecstatic experiences, with decisive impact in personal healing, outreach, reconciled relationship, and demonstrations of compassion. This book is a very useful one for everyone desiring renewal.