
The Conversion of Ambrosio Gonzales

Fueling a Westward Movement through Sustained Memorialization

ABSTRACT Memorialization of Ambrosio Gonzales, a nineteenth-century Methodist convert from New Mexico, has aided in the maintenance and expansion of Latinx Protestantism. Gonzales's trajectory matters to communal and institutional memories, I argue, because his life was embedded within the very origins of Latinx Protestantism in the Southwest. Moreover, Gonzales became emblematic of Protestantism at a time of westward expansion. Even today, commemorating Gonzales bolsters Latinx Protestant identities and legitimizes missionary efforts. While memorializations of Gonzales have often been symbolic, his life also had long-lasting structural effects on Latinx Protestantism in the West. This article is part of a special issue of *Pacific Historical Review*, "Religion in the Nineteenth-Century American West." **KEYWORDS** Ambrosio Gonzales, Latinx, Protestantism, New Mexico, Hispanics, Catholicism, Conversion

Memorialization of nineteenth-century Hispano Protestant converts has contributed to the maintenance and expansion of Latinx Protestantism, especially in the southwestern United States. Even as they rejected Hispano Catholics' veneration of saints, Hispano Protestants developed their own practices commemorating their co-ethnic religious ancestors.¹ A recent article published in *Christianity Today*, the flagship magazine of the evangelical movement, hearkens to this tradition by spotlighting a key figure in Latinx Protestant history—Ambrosio Gonzales. Writer Eric Rivera celebrates Gonzales's rise to prominence as the first Hispano Protestant convert in New Mexico, and one of the first such converts in the Spanish-speaking Americas.²

1. Paul Barton, *Hispanic Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists in Texas* (University of Texas Press, 2006). Hispanos are New Mexico and Southwest residents tracing their ancestry to Spanish settlers and, to a lesser extent, to Native populations.

2. Eric Rivera, "The First Mexican Protestant Loved the Bible," *Christian History | Learn the History of Christianity & the Church*, February 18, 2019 (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2019/february/first-mexican-protestant-bible.html>).

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Rivera's article conveys several themes that align with the evangelical spirit of early Hispano Protestants: Gonzales became Protestant through exposure to, and interest in, the Christian scriptures; his home became a site of religious formation for Hispanos in his community; he faced life-threatening religious persecution from co-ethnics; and he ultimately led dozens to Protestant Christianity, at a time when few Hispanos were converting. Rivera's article is intended to brighten a supposedly dimming spotlight on Gonzales's life story. While written from a popular and evangelical perspective, it highlights a concern that scholars would do well to take seriously: if Latinx Protestantism is indeed significant to U.S. history—and if Latinxs are to be part of American Protestantism's cultural memory—then Gonzales should be recognized as a key figure, both in his own day and as a symbol in continued use by missionaries and converts.

Like Rivera, Protestant communities and religious historians in the early twentieth century also found meaning in commemorating Gonzales. As Protestantism expanded into the American West and made slow inroads within southwestern Latinx populations, Gonzales's story stood as a powerful symbol for converts and missionaries alike. This article affirms Gonzales's significance to both religious and Latinx history—and presses further as to why his story became so important for the historical memory of Latinx Protestantism. Gonzales's trajectory matters to communal and institutional memories, I argue, because his life is embedded within the very origins of Latinx Protestantism. His story has been used not only to affirm past missionary endeavors on the part of white Protestants, but also to encourage continued efforts. Likewise, his story legitimates Latinx Protestants because Gonzales, depicted as a Protestant prototype worthy of emulation, represents Hispano Protestantism's multigenerational lineage. While historical sources dispute whether Gonzales is actually the first Hispano Protestant, what is clear is that his story has become so emblematic of a sustained Hispano and Latinx Protestant church as to be significant in its own right.

Exploring beyond traditional memorialization of Gonzales and his community, I consider de-conversions, counter-versions, and non-celebratory counter-readings of early Hispano Protestantism. These half-steps, missteps, and backpedals within Gonzales's circle also shaped the emergence of Latinx Protestantism. Likewise, I remain attuned to expressions of lived religion, the everyday expressions of faith among everyday people.³ This attention

3. Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices* (New York University Press, 2021).

provides a counterbalance to the prioritized perspectives of denominational writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, often guided by paternalism, anti-Catholicism, success metrics of numerical growth, and a desire for assimilation and Americanization of Hispanos.⁴ Although many sources originate with such writers, the liminal practices of early Hispano Protestants are at times legible between the lines. Catholic records and local oral histories add nuance to official Protestant sources.

I begin by examining the social dimensions that shaped Gonzales's religious milieu. Secondly, I examine memorialized aspects of Gonzales's life, particularly his conversion, his ties to Methodism, and his household as a site of religious community and conflict. Finally, I trace how Gonzales's household extended Methodism westward. Ultimately, this article highlights the ways that a precursor to Latinx Protestantism teetered on the margins of empire, at times benefitting from proximity to external, colonial power, but often drawing vitality from internal, localized expressions of agency, innovation, and struggle. Recollection of this early Hispano community from the turn of the twentieth century onward represents both a model of and motivation for Latinx Protestant expansion westward.

BIRTH IN CONTESTED SPACES OF FAITH

Gonzales's emergence as a Protestant leader took place amid a lifetime of religious and political upheaval. Through the span of his life, Gonzales lived under the flags of various nations, despite remaining a resident of New Mexico. Born in Spanish-controlled territory, Gonzales lived through Mexico's struggle for independence from Spain and experienced the conquest of the Southwest by the United States. His hometown of Peralta was the site of the last Civil War battle fought in New Mexico, providing glimpses of the Confederate flag as well. Gonzales was born in 1814 to Manuela Aragon and Salvador Gonzales. He was baptized at the Sandía Pueblo Mission of New Mexico, called Nuestra Señora de los Dolores.⁵ Baptismal records designate the Gonzales household as "*vecinos*," a term Franciscans used to distinguish Hispanos in New Mexico from "*Indios*," or the Indigenous population. At the time of Gonzales's birth, the Gonzales household was based in the village of Alameda, New Mexico.

4. Barton, *Hispanic Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists*; Susan Mitchell Yohn, *A Contest of Faiths: Missionary Women and Pluralism in the American Southwest* (Cornell University Press, 1995).

5. Yolanda R. Chavez, Sandia Mission baptisms, Reel 8 Film 0016998, Albuquerque Main Library, Albuquerque, N.M. (<http://files.usgwarchives.net/nm/bernalillo/church/gonzales-bapt.txt>).

Alameda and the Sandía Pueblo were lands originally inhabited by the Tiwa people, the population encompassed by the Sandía Mission.

The Gonzales family eventually settled in the town of Peralta, a site of contested social, municipal, and national boundaries. Located about twenty miles south of Albuquerque, within a region known as El Río Abajo, the town was bordered on its western edge by the Río Grande. The settlement drew its name from Pedro de Peralta, the first royal governor of New Mexico, appointed by Spain to the post in 1610. Pedro de Peralta sold land claimed by the Spanish crown to the Native American Pueblo of Isleta, who eventually sold a portion to Hispanos residing there for years. The formal town of Peralta came into existence on June 7, 1844, after these Hispanos purchased twenty-four hundred acres for \$150.00 and seventy-five sheep.⁶ Gonzales and his family would have been among the Hispano settlers that purchased the land from the Pueblo. Sadly, the boundaries of these Native territories would remain in dispute for decades, with contestation coming from Hispanos, and later from white American settlers.⁷ Gonzales lived in a context where distinctions between Hispanos and Native Pueblo inhabitants remained, and soon social boundary negotiations would heighten between Hispanos and white Americans, who often saw Hispanos as racially impure.

In 1848, the United States took control of this territory. Under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the Río Grande, demarcating the edge of Peralta, delineated a significant portion of the U.S.-Mexico border starting two hundred miles to the South of the town. From the Río Abajo area and through the Río Grande Valley, the river traced a route trafficked by soldiers and business people to the U.S.-Mexico border. The corridor formed a leg of El Camino Real, with evidence that it was used for generations prior by Indigenous peoples. Gonzales traveled this route in his earlier years.⁸ For the brief period of 1848–1852, Peralta was the seat of Valencia County. Records indicate that Gonzales's primary occupations were that of farmer, lawyer, and justice of the peace, roles which placed him front and center in Peralta's civic life, a microcosm of the region's political patterns.⁹

6. A.A. Carter, "Points of Interest in Valencia County" (Works Progress Administration, 1936).

7. United Pueblos Agency, "Pueblo of Isleta Land Status" (U.S. Department of the Interior, April 1, 1940).

8. Willard L. Steinsiek, "Report from the 2008 Heritage Tour," *New Mexico Conference United Methodist Historical Journal* 2 (November 2008): 45–48.

9. US Census Bureau, "Gonzales and Some Gonzales Bas Surnames Valencia Co" (Albuquerque Main Library Film, 2017) (<http://files.usgwarchives.net/nm/valencia/church/gonzales-bapt.txt>).

Changes in the religious landscape were especially consequential to Gonzales. Gonzales was born into a world where the *Santero* traditions of New Mexico colored Hispano devotional life; Santeros were craftworkers who produced images of saints, typically carved out of wood. Devotional objects in this era also included images of saints painted onto animal hides, and *retablos*, images painted onto wood panels. During the time period of Gonzales's childhood, Hispano laity were highly invested in the production of *santos*, and numerous devotional traditions developed around these revered representations.¹⁰ Yet, in this era, Catholic devotion was marked by instability.

From 1797 to 1821, Roman Catholic churches in New Mexico were secularized and placed under the care of the Bishop of Durango, based six hundred miles South of El Río Abajo. Already, lived religious traditions such as *Santero* practices were called into question by incoming Catholic leaders, who saw local practices as veering away from the expressions of Catholic material culture with which they were familiar. In 1821, when Mexico declared its independence from Spain, the cadre of Franciscan friars who cared for churches in New Mexico was largely depleted. In this season, as parishes and missions in the region were supervised by a distant church hierarchy, various priests in the territory expressed dissatisfaction with existing political and religious leadership structures. Father Antonio Martínez of Taos, for example, was a key figure in the Chimayo Revolt of 1837 and the Taos Revolt of 1847.¹¹ The first Protestant missionaries arrived in the region soon after these revolts, and Peralta became one of the primary testing fields for their work, but not before a religious controversy erupted in the nearby townships.

Among the priests that challenged the decisions of the Catholic hierarchy, one controversial figure—Benigno Cárdenas—uniquely shaped the religious ecology inhabited by the Gonzales family in El Río Abajo. Father Cárdenas arrived in El Río Abajo from Mexico City in 1849 as an excommunicate of the Franciscan order, allegedly commending himself to others by using forged papers from a bishop.¹² The local vicar wrote to the priests of El Río Abajo

10. Ross Frank, "Making New Mexico Santos: Franciscans and Vecino Dominance in Late Colonial New Mexico," *New Mexico Historical Review* 75, no. 3 (July 1, 2000).

11. Daniel Ramirez, "Latina/Latino Protestantism," in *Religion and American Cultures*, eds. Gary Laderman and Luis Leon, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 193–97.

12. Fray Angelico Chavez, "A Nineteenth-Century New Mexico Schism," *New Mexico Historical Review* 58, no. 1 (1983); John Taylor, "Cracks in the Pope's Armor," in *A River Runs*

area warning them of Cárdenas's activities. Cárdenas had taken over the Tomé parish, a few miles south of Peralta, the very parish where Gonzales's parents had married, his siblings had been baptized, and his own children were baptized. It is likely that Gonzales crossed paths with Cárdenas during this period, and he may have even worshiped at this parish during Cárdenas's self-appointed tenure. Bishop José Antonio Laureano de Zubiría sent written warning to the clergy of El Río Abajo, assuring them that he had entreated Cárdenas to leave New Mexico. Yet, Cárdenas evaded the Bishop's restrictions as New Mexico was removed from the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Durango in 1850. That year, Pope Pius IX appointed Father Jean Baptiste Lamy to oversee the newly created Vicariate Apostolic of New Mexico.

Arriving in Santa Fe, New Mexico, from France in 1851, Bishop Lamy's tenure marked the beginning of a new era for the Hispano Catholic church. Lamy at times clashed with Hispano clergy, and disparaged some of the local traditions, such as the *Penitentes* and the devotional practices around santos.¹³ As these traditions had already flourished under criticism, Lamy's reinforcement of clerical disdain toward local practices further exacerbated religious tensions. A number of the priests that he appointed throughout the diocese were French. Though New Mexico now had a Bishop in Santa Fe, the cultural distance of the hierarchy allowed space for a rogue leader such as Cárdenas to advocate for, and garner support from, the local people. Upon the arrival of Bishop Lamy to the region, Cárdenas hoped to gain his favor.¹⁴ Lamy was warned that Cárdenas was deceptive, and the Bishop rescinded support for the priest, leaving him an excommunicate. Cárdenas, unwilling to give up his clerical role, declared himself a Protestant and had a nonsectarian chapel built for himself in Valencia, perhaps the first non-denominational Christian church in New Mexico. A cluster of followers stayed under his care.

Residents of El Río Abajo such as the Gonzales family and Cárdenas were soon confronted by new religious agents in their midst. Protestant missionaries began arriving in the area, typically to serve white American settlers and soldiers. The missionaries thereafter considered the prospects of outreach among the Hispano and Indigenous populations of the region. A Baptist chaplain turned missionary, Hiram Walter Read, arrived in New Mexico in 1849 and engaged in the first recorded outreach efforts to Hispanos in El Río

through Us, eds. Richard Melzer and John Taylor (Los Ranchos de Albuquerque, N.M.: Rio Grande Books, 2015).

13. Ramírez, "Latina/Latino Protestantism."

14. Chavez, "A Nineteenth-Century New Mexico Schism."

Abajo. Baptist missionaries John and Harriet Shaw followed Read in 1852 and opened a school in the area. In 1850, W. J. Kephart was the first Presbyterian missionary to the area and George Nicholson was the first Methodist missionary to the region. The Presbyterians made few recorded missionary advances during this period. The Methodist Episcopal Church, on the other hand, achieved the most sustained gains of Hispano members, though the Baptists made significant inroads initially and provided a sizable transfer of members for the Methodists.¹⁵ Cárdenas would be one of the first Hispanos willing to ally himself with the work of these Protestant missionaries, with Gonzales following soon after.

A TESTIMONY TO TELL

Early contact with Protestant missionaries marked Gonzales as a prominent figure in a variety of missionary records and analyses. Most extant documents that chart Gonzales's religious activities fall into three categories: nineteenth-century denominational church records published during Gonzales's lifetime, missionary-focused writings from the early twentieth century, and historical research from scholars and local historians clustered around the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Records in the first category typically denote Gonzales's presence at denominational gatherings in New Mexico. These are primarily records of the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC). Of notable importance is the MEC's bilingual periodical *The Christian Advocate/El Abogado Cristiano*, which, under the supervision of Rev. Thomas Harwood, featured stories about church work in New Mexico. Many records of Gonzales's life derive from this source, including Harwood's later writings and that of others. Gonzales also appeared in the Catholic publication, *La Revista Católica*, where he and his wife, Maria Viviana Gonzales, were criticized for their Protestant practices.

At the start of the twentieth century, decades after Gonzales's death, a second category of sources emerged. These sources largely called upon individuals who knew Gonzales personally, including Harwood; the sources were written by writers of various denominations. Several of these records frame Gonzales's testimony as representative of Protestant missionary success. Gonzales's conversion story is front and center in these accounts, which also speak to his perseverance in the face of persecution, and to his commitment

15. Juan Francisco Martínez, *Sea La Luz: The Making of Mexican Protestantism in the American Southwest, 1829–1900* (University of North Texas Press, 2006).

as a leader of Hispano Protestants. These sources sometimes name Gonzales as the first Hispano Protestant convert; they often convey honor toward Gonzales and the missionary efforts that established Protestant churches around El Río Abajo. In his *History of New Mexico*, for example, Harwood referenced Gonzales's funeral, which took place October 6, 1884, noting that three hundred people attended the service, and two hundred visited graveside. As a tribute to Gonzales, Harwood noted the following:

Ambrozio [sic] C. Gonzales was the first Mexican Protestant in the world, so far as we know. He always told me that he was the first in New Mexico. For many years he was hated because he was a Protestant, but for many years before his death he was highly esteemed and loved because he was a Protestant and a good and useful man. He died as he had lived, sweetly trusting in the Lord Jesus.¹⁶

Harwood's tribute encapsulates sentiments shared across publications about the unique place of Gonzales as both a model of Christian faith and a forebear of a larger movement.

Finally, in the latter half of the twentieth century, a number of writers reflect upon the life of Gonzales from academically oriented perspectives. These writers tend to be church and ethnic studies historians. Opinions about Gonzales become more nuanced in this body of work, though many of the early themes about conversion and religious devotion shine through. Some publications identify someone other than Gonzales as the first Hispano Protestant. Nevertheless, Latinx religion scholars, whose research became more visible in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, especially situate Gonzales as a key figure in the modern development of Latinx Protestantism.¹⁷ Indeed, few Mexican or New Mexican Protestant figures receive the attention that Gonzales receives. Many of these scholars are particularly critical of the paternalism that Gonzales and his contemporaries experienced

16. Thomas Harwood, *History of New Mexico Spanish and English Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church from 1850 to 1910*, in *Decades* (Albuquerque: Abogado Press, 1910), 136.

17. Martínez, *Sea La Luz*; Juan Francisco Martínez, *Los Protestantes: An Introduction to Latino Protestantism in the United States* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2011); Moises Sandoval, *Fronteras: A History of the Latin American Church in the USA Since 1513* (San Antonio: Mexican American Cultural Center, 1983); Alfredo Nández, *History of the Rio Grande Conference of the United Methodist Church* (Southern Methodist University, 1980), 5–10; Brett Hendrickson, *Mexican American Religions: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2021).

from white American Protestant leaders and note the hesitation that Methodists and others had in ceding leadership roles to Hispanos.¹⁸

Gonzales's conversion narrative is the aspect of his story most consistently memorialized, with the second batch of sources especially committed to retelling Gonzales's conversion in hagiographic fashion. Accounts contained in various denominational publications depict how Gonzales met a Methodist minister, the Rev. Enoch Nicholson, who led him to identify with Protestant tradition. Robert Craig, a Presbyterian author writing about Presbyterian missions among Mexicans, compressed the tale of Gonzales's conversion as follows: "Mr. Nicholson visited Albuquerque, Peralta, Bélen, Corales, and Iocisro. While at Peralta he left a copy of the Bible with Don Ambrosio Gonzales, which led to his conversion."¹⁹ Four years later, Harwood published the first in a two-volume account of New Mexico history which detailed this encounter and claims to relay direct narrations from Gonzales:

"Brother Nicholson, the Methodist minister, came down from Santa Fe and spent a few days at my house, and gave me this Bible. It was the first Bible of any kind I had ever seen. I think it was in 1853. The book was a charm to me. When the rest retired, I sat up and read the good book. I read nearly the whole book of Genesis. I then turned to the New Testament and read several chapters in Saint John. One chapter was the fourteenth—'Let not your heart be troubled, etc.'—It was to me a new book. I read until the chickens were crowing for day. I laid down on a lounge in the same room and soon fell asleep. When I woke the sun was shining through the window into my face. The Sun of Righteousness was shining brightly in my soul. I have been a Christian and a Protestant ever since."²⁰

This experience had life-altering effects on Gonzales. As Harwood described in his second volume, in 1855, two years after his conversion, Gonzales was made a class leader of a Methodist group by Rev. D.D. Lore.²¹ After this commissioning, Gonzales was left without assistance from Methodist missionaries until Harwood went to New Mexico and met him in 1871.

18. David Maldonado, *Protestantes/Protestants: Hispanic Christianity within Mainline Traditions* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 65.

19. Robert M. Craig, *Our Mexicans* (New York: Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., 1904), 45.

20. Thomas Harwood, *History of New Mexico Spanish and English Missions of the Methodist Church from 1850 to 1910, In Decades* (Albuquerque: Abogado Press, 1908), 45–46.

21. Harwood, *History of New Mexico Spanish and English Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (1910), 39–40.

Harwood marveled that Gonzales, though denominationally unlicensed, continued to preach. Harwood reorganized the Peralta work and licensed Gonzales to preach, formalizing his leadership of the Protestant Bible class he had stewarded. The role of the printed Bible was central to Gonzales's conversion testimony, echoing Protestant boundary-making strategies toward Catholics in New Mexico. The description of the Bible as a charm might have communicated its primacy over other devotional objects. It appears that the Bible was not only special because of the information it contained, but also because of its material presence. As noted by the Latino Protestantism scholar Juan Francisco Martínez, family Bibles were held in high regard within Hispano households.²² The power of the Bible, the authenticity of Gonzales' conversion, and the persistence of his faith were central to these narratives.

TO BE THE FIRST

The designation of Gonzales as the first Hispano Protestant convert added gravitas to his testimony. This designation rings out in Harwood's second volume chronicling Methodism in New Mexico. According to Harwood, New Mexico is the site of the first Spanish Mission, the first Protestant sermon preached in Spanish in the Americas, the first baptism among Spanish speakers in the Americas, the first church building serving Spanish speakers, the first martyr, and "the first Mexican [Protestant] convert, Don. Ambrosio Gonzales."²³ In Harwood's list of firsts to be remembered in New Mexico, Gonzales is the only figure actually named. According to Harwood's broadly circulated volumes, Gonzales's conversion had hemispheric implications.

As previously indicated, Gonzales was not the sole candidate for the honor of first Hispano Protestant. Benigno Cárdenas was identified as the first convert by several authors, despite his complicated trajectory.²⁴ Cárdenas's official turn to denominational Protestantism involved rejection from the Catholic hierarchy in New Mexico, traveling to Rome, facing rejection by the Vatican, then receiving religious instruction from an Anglican minister in London. Cárdenas arrived in New York City with an endorsement letter for

22. Martínez, *Los Protestantes*, 47–48.

23. Harwood, *History of New Mexico Spanish and English Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (1910), 39.

24. Vernon Monroe McCombs, *From Over the Border: A Study of the Mexicans in the United States* (Council of Women for Home Missions and Missionary Education Movement, 1925), 162.

acceptance into the Methodist fold. Commissioned to preach by the Methodists, Cárdenas returned to preach New Mexico's first public Protestant sermon in Spanish. He continued to preach across the region. When Methodist missionaries left the territory c. 1854, Cárdenas continued preaching, requesting that the Methodists provide a Bishop for New Mexico. The MEC Missionary Society published in its 1855 report that "from various reliable sources we were assured that [Cárdenas's] ministry was the only productive Protestant ministry in the Territory."²⁵ Cárdenas eventually grew disillusioned with the Methodists, given the dearth of missionary assistance they provided.

Conflicting stories emerged about Cárdenas. Some Protestants believe that Cárdenas returned to the Catholic faith. Others argue that Cárdenas remained in the Protestant fold.²⁶ Modern Methodists in El Río Abajo commemorate him still as a pioneer of the Christian faith.²⁷ Catholics, too, offer diverging stories. One Catholic periodical casts him in proximity to Judas and designates him an apostate who led others astray.²⁸ Father Angelico Chavez, in turn, alleges that Cárdenas was reinstated to the Franciscan order and retired peacefully in Cuba among Franciscan brethren. Even if Cárdenas returned to his order, he certainly paved the way for other Protestant preachers, including Gonzales. Nevertheless, for purposes of inspiring Protestant missionary projects and support, Cárdenas's story is less effective than Gonzales's.

Another candidate for first Hispano convert is Jose Maria Chaves.²⁹ Chaves was allegedly the first Hispano to be baptized by the Baptists, with the rite performed in the Río Grande. Baptist records list him as the first convert.³⁰ He is remembered as an important preacher and early Baptist figure. Yet, Chaves too is shrouded in controversy. In 1862 a Confederate unit, Sibley's Brigade, fought and lost a battle in Peralta. The retreat of the brigade, a force composed mostly of Texans, managed to draw in one

25. Dallas Lore, *Annual Report of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1856), 31.

26. Náñez, *History of the Rio Grande Conference of the United Methodist Church*, 5–10.

27. Barton, *Hispanic Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists*.

28. Gasparri, Donato M. 1882. *Revista Católica*, Volume 8 (Revista Católica, January 1, 1882), 198.

29. Additional names that circulate within this conversation include Baptist preacher Blas Chavez and Jose Senun. While Senun was Indigenous not Hispano, he was one of the first locals to support Protestant work in the area.

30. Martínez, *Sea La Luz*, 56.

sympathizer from Peralta—Chaves. Local priest Fr. Jean Baptiste Ralliere relayed the negative effects of Chaves's actions in his *Apuntes*:

At the entrance of the Texans he did much harm to the neighbors of Don Juan Jose Sanchez; he took from them almost forty mules and he made them give something "to Boot." But he left with the Texans in 1862. Thanks to God.

While it is unclear the extent to which Chaves remained tied to this infantry unit, a letter from General Henry Hopkins Sibley to Confederate president Jefferson Davis suggests that Chaves maintained contact with the Confederate army. Sibley refers to Chaves and other Hispano Confederate sympathizers as refugees, and praised their loyalty to the Confederacy.³¹ The annual report of the Baptist Home Missionary Society indicates that Chaves was dismissed from their missions' roster "for joining the rebel Texan army."³² So, while some records recall Chaves favorably, his Confederate connection dampened his status as a hero, especially among Union supporters. This association with the Confederacy would have made him less desirable as a symbolic "first." The decisive nature of Gonzales's conversion, including his turning away from Catholicism, his persistence in the faith, and his commitment to the work in New Mexico, differentiated him from his contemporaries. His political alignments also offered more possibilities for those seeking a model of Hispano Protestantism.

METHODIST METHODS

Central to Gonzales's emergence as a key religious figure was his commitment to Methodism. Gonzales's Methodist identity was solidified as he navigated the possibilities of joining other denominations. Even as Gonzales's trajectory was significantly shaped by his encounter with the Baptists, his persistence as a Methodist ensured continued support from the denomination with the most institutional vitality in his immediate region. Furthermore, although Gonzales's testimony is often transmitted in ways that emphasize his persistence amid religious isolation, his ability to draw support from distinct denominations helped to ensure his continued success as a religious leader.

31. Lynda Lasswell Crist, *The Papers of Jefferson Davis: January—September 1863* (LSU Press, 1997).

32. Jay S Backus, *Annual Report* (American Baptist Home Mission Society, 1863), 52.

Often downplayed in Methodist accounts, Gonzales had contact with Baptist leaders at a critical time, while still solidifying his commitment to Methodism. Baptist minister Hiram Read was in Albuquerque in 1851, having arrived two years earlier in Santa Fe.³³ Soon after, he mounted a concerted effort around Peralta. Baptist missionaries James Milton Shaw and Susannah Bidwell Shaw followed suit, with Susannah journaling about her journey to and ministry in New Mexico. The Shaws are important as they established a mission in Peralta, in 1852. While the Shaws did not discuss Gonzales in their personal letters, Stapleton notes that Gonzales appears in the Records of Proceedings of the Baptist Church of Christ of Albuquerque.³⁴

In 1854, Gonzales was considered a candidate for membership at a meeting of the first Baptist Church in Albuquerque.³⁵ Though it is unclear whom Gonzales encountered first—the Baptists or the Methodists—he likely knew of the Baptists in Peralta when he encountered Methodism in 1853. At the 1854 meeting, Gonzales stood alongside none other than Cárdenas, as potential candidates to become Baptists. The two were joined by a third neophyte, Jose Senun, who became a key Baptist leader among his people of the Laguna Pueblo.³⁶ Conversion experiences had brought these three men of distinct social locations, a former cleric in Mexico City, an Hispano civil servant, and a Native leader of the Laguna Pueblo, to share the same platform. After hearing testimonies from the three, Baptist leaders voted and approved their membership. Their baptisms were to follow.

Gonzales's baptism was likely scheduled to take place in the Río Grande, a site adopted by Baptists for the rite.³⁷ The waters demarcating the U.S.-Mexico border farther south in Texas were the same waters that marked religious change for these Baptist converts. However, both Gonzales, and Cárdenas, in the end, backed out of baptism. Of the three, Senun alone proceeded with the rite. Gonzales and Cárdenas both had apparently committed themselves to Methodism and understood that baptism would mark them as Baptists. Cárdenas denounced statements by the Baptist clergy that he had agreed to baptism.³⁸ Important questions remain as to the meaning

33. Samuel Howard Ford, *Ford's Christian Repository* (Hull & Brother, printers, 1854).

34. Ernest Stapleton, "The History of Baptist Missions in New Mexico, 1849–1866" (Ph.D. diss., 1954), https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/hist_ctds/199.

35. *Ibid.*

36. American Baptist Home Mission Society, *Report of the American Baptist Home Mission Society* (New York: Holman, Gray, and Co, 1862).

37. Stapleton, "The History of Baptist Missions in New Mexico."

38. Lore, *Annual Report of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church*.

that baptism held for Gonzales and Cárdenas. Baptismal practices distinguished Baptists from Catholics and from other Protestants.³⁹ Perhaps Gonzales and Cárdenas preferred to honor their Catholic baptisms as infants. Cárdenas squarely situated his refusal of baptism within his Methodist affiliation at the time. It remains that baptism marked a line that these men were not yet willing to cross. They were willing to make declarations of faith before Baptists, but baptism gave them reason for pause. Methodism, on the other hand, allowed Gonzales and Cárdenas to retain their existing baptisms, perhaps honoring familial connections.

Despite his distancing from Baptist practices, Gonzales's time with the Baptists was religiously invigorating. When he was assigned the role of teacher by Rev. Lore in 1855, Gonzales had clearly participated in activities with the Baptists, which shaped the leadership role he assumed with the Methodists. From 1855 to 1971, according to Harwood, Gonzales cultivated a group of forty-two Protestants at Peralta, apparently without contact from white denominational missionaries.⁴⁰ For the first six years of that period, however, the Baptists were active in Peralta. The church they built there predated even the local Catholic parish. While it is unclear whether Gonzales maintained contact with the Baptists in those initial years, he clearly had an accessible line of communication with them. As Baptist missionaries were recalled during the Civil War, and the congregation disintegrated, it is probable that Gonzales's church absorbed the remaining Baptists. Through contests in Peralta's religious ecology, the Methodist church grew. Gonzales's ability to draw resources from these distinct denominations served his religious endeavors.

TENDING TO THE HOUSEHOLD

The Gonzales household is remembered as an important site in the creation and preservation of Hispano Protestantism, but the household was not devoid of in-house conflict. An unnamed woman, a family member opposed to Protestantism, would grind chiles outside a window of the home where church members gathered to worship. She likely used the typical *molcajete* and *tejolote* (mortar and pestle) to intentionally release the irritant, capsaicin, into the home, aggravating worshipers at the gathering. The year was 1871,

39. Martínez, *Sea La Luz*.

40. Harwood, *History of New Mexico Spanish and English Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (1910), 39.

and Methodist Superintendent Thomas Harwood arrived to inspect what became the Peralta Methodist Mission (PMM), meeting at Gonzales's home for sixteen years. Harwood's presence and preaching prompted the woman to stand singularly in opposition to the Protestants in her household. She had free reign of the home and to her, the Methodist missionary was the outsider. She availed herself of mundane objects, emblematic of New Mexico, to hinder Harwood's work.

The Chile story suggests that Hispano Protestants remembered the relational disruptions that emerged within their households. Allen A. Carter, commissioned in 1936 by the Works Progress Administration to document the history of the Peralta region, collected this account from Francisco Mirabal, a member of the PMM. Mirabal, born in 1857, was Gonzales's cousin. Nearing eighty years old at the time that Carter published his report, Mirabal reached back over sixty years to retrieve this quotidian act of resistance. Through this act, Mirabal's relative "thought she might discourage this preaching and thus bring her family and neighbors back into the Catholic faith." It is unclear if her efforts expelled the group from the home, but the following year, 1872, the PMM moved to a converted mercantile building, with a new cupola erected atop. Mirabal, a teenager at the time, helped to renovate the building, transforming it into what was possibly the first storefront Latinx Protestant church.⁴¹

Religious tensions in the Gonzales household also manifested publicly. One memorable controversy involving Gonzales played out in print. *La Revista Católica*, a Jesuit newspaper printed in Las Vegas, New Mexico, rebutted claims made by *El Abogado Cristiano*, a Methodist publication, about a young woman's conversion to Protestantism. The young woman in question, Luisa Sedillo, was a student at a local Methodist-run school and lived in the home of Ambrosio Gonzales and his wife Maria Viviana Gonzales. Sedillo had extensive contact with Miss A.E. Hilton, a teacher at the school. The two had developed a friendship, in part because Sedillo was proficient in English and could converse with Hilton. Sedillo's parents had contracted her out to work as a live-in "domestic servant" for the Gonzales family, a detail captured in the 1870 U.S. census.⁴² She lived in the Gonzales home for eight years or more.

41. Carter, "Points of Interest in Valencia County," 2–3.

42. Donato M. Gasparri, "Revista Católica, Volume 6, 1880," *Revista Católica*, January 1, 1880, <https://epublications.regis.edu/revistacatolica/6/>; U.S. Census Bureau, "1870 U.S. Census. Peralta,

Sadly, Sedillo died at about twenty-four years of age, in 1880, of an undisclosed illness, while still employed in the Gonzales household. Controversy emerged while she was on her deathbed. Hilton visited Sedillo at the Gonzales family home and was present at the time of her untimely passing. According to Harwood, Sedillo became Protestant but “probably did not let her parents know much about it for the sake of peace at home.”⁴³ Sedillo’s family was Roman Catholic, as noted in *La Revista Católica*.⁴⁴ An account of Sedillo’s passing was published by Hilton in *El Abogado Cristiano*, indicating that on her deathbed, “Luisa wished them to pray and sing.” The reference to “them” signaled the participation of members and friends of the Protestant household within which she resided, which included Ambrosio Gonzales and Maria Viviana Gonzales.⁴⁵ The group sang the “Coronation hymn,” which contains the lyrics “*Jesus mi amo es el rey*” [Jesus my master is the king]. The word for master, *amo*, in this case refers to someone who has charge over a servant, the latter role echoing Sedillo’s position. Hilton’s narrative suggests that the group sang in both English and Spanish, providing a glimpse into linguistic acculturation processes among Protestants. The group was at least familiar with hymns translated from English to Spanish. Perhaps the PMM was the first bilingual English-Spanish congregation.

A volley of writing ensued across the platforms of *La Revista Católica* and *El Abogado Cristiano*. The account printed in *El Abogado* celebrated Sedillo’s Protestant conversion and burial. *La Revista* countered by publishing a response from Fr. Ralliere, the parish priest that ministered to the Sedillo family. According to Ralliere, two weeks before her death, Sedillo requested to undergo confession. Ralliere explained that he visited her and administered the rite of confession, adding that Sedillo’s mother Gregoria was enthused by this event. Ralliere insisted that Luisa Sedillo remained Catholic until her last days. Even if the Protestants were sincere about fulfilling her last requests, *La Revista* asserted that she must have been delirious, or perhaps her final words were misconstrued.

Throughout the account printed in *La Revista*, Ralliere conveyed a sense of intimate friendship with the Sedillo family, while casting the Protestants as

Valencia County, New Mexico. Population Schedule, s.v. ‘Ambrosio Gonzales.’ (1870), <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M4S7-QTV>.

43. Harwood, *History of New Mexico Spanish and English Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (1910), 166.

44. Gasparri, “Revista Católica.”

45. A.E. Hilton, “Obituary,” *El Abogado*, August 7, 1880, n.p.

opportunists. The controversy would have been avoided, according to Ralliere, had Luisa Sedillo not worked for the Gonzales family. Ralliere asserted that he had counseled her father against her service years before. Even still, Ralliere presented Ambrosio Gonzales as having redeeming traits, indicating that he defended the priest from Maria Viviana Gonzales when Ralliere attempted to remove Sedillo from their employment. Ralliere confessed that had Ambrosio not intervened, Ralliere would have retaliated shamefully. The account elevated Ambrosio's status, but presented Maria Viviana as the villain, highlighting the gendered nature of these accounts. The back and forth between publications continued, and the authors used the incident to debate the legitimacy of their theological positions. Harwood questioned the doctrine of purgatory and elevated Protestant burial traditions. Father Donato M. Gasparri, editor of *La Revista*, questioned Protestant individualism and their reliance on personal Biblical interpretation, contending that individual Protestants interpreted the Bible as they pleased.

The counter-versions of Luisa Sedillo's story present several questions. Is it possible that Sedillo both confessed to the priest in keeping with her familial tradition and partook of Protestant worship within the Gonzales household? The power differentials that Sedillo would have experienced in the Gonzales household must be considered. What is clear is that the Gonzales household was a space of contestation for defining the boundaries of Hispano Protestantism, and Sedillo's story became part of this process. Gonzales was front and center in these negotiations of Protestant and Catholic boundaries, as were the members of his extended family. While tales of persecution and violent confrontation were prominent in shaping Hispano Protestant identities, these closer, intimate conflicts would have been just as influential, if not more so, in defining Hispano Protestant identities. Likewise, these conversations, made public, became part of religious boundaries in the Southwest.

A LEGACY TRANSMITTED THROUGH MIGRATION

In the Summer of 1912—almost one hundred years after the birth of Ambrosio Gonzales—news spread of another minister, also named Ambrosio Gonzales, appointed to the care of the Mexican Methodist Church of Santa Ana, California. With the Mexican Revolution catalyzing extensive Mexican migration to California, the minister, known as A. C. Gonzales, and hailed

as “the Hero of God,” was received with interdenominational fanfare.⁴⁶ Initially stewarded by Presbyterians, the mission was handed over to the Methodist Episcopal Church as a unique interdenominational collaboration.⁴⁷ A. C. Gonzales, its first pastor, was an ideal candidate for the job, according to the MEC publication, *El Mexicano*.⁴⁸ Often lionized for his success in ministry among ethnic Mexicans, one of the reasons that A. C. Gonzales offered such promise was because of his ties to Protestant legacies from the Southwest. His maternal lineage marked him as a descendant of Blas Chavez, one of the first Baptist preachers of El Río Abajo.⁴⁹ Publications especially celebrated A. C. Gonzales as a descendant of the original Ambrosio Gonzales from New Mexico, his paternal grandfather. A. C. Gonzales had grown up alongside his grandfather, and now ecclesial writers cast him as the heir apparent to the Gonzales spiritual legacy.

A. C. Gonzales’s ties to his grandfather were more than biological. He was brought to live at his grandfather’s home as a one-year-old, c. 1875. The elder Gonzales had a profound influence on the life of young A. C., by A. C.’s own admission. A chronicler of Protestant missions, Margaret Seebach, published A. C. Gonzales’s account of his ministerial history the year that he passed away. A. C. relayed how at eight years of age he would assist his aging grandfather, whose eyesight was deteriorating. He chauffeured his grandfather in a pony cart and accompanied him in visiting parishioners and fulfilling other ministerial duties. In preparation for his passing, the elder Ambrosio Gonzales spoke to his grandson: “Ambrosio, my dear boy . . . I am going to leave you very soon. You have my name, and I am glad to think there will still be an Ambrosio Gonzales to take my place. I wish that you might take up my work also, when you are old enough, and become a minister of the gospel, to carry the good news as I have tried to do.”⁵⁰ Thus, the mantle was passed from grandfather to grandson, though the younger was initially hesitant to accept it.

The Mexican Revolution took place the decade prior to Seebach’s publication. Her writings on the Gonzaleses presented a different type of call to

46. Raymond Cyrus Hoiles, “Saturday Evening,” *Santa Ana Daily Register*, March 18, 1939.

47. Charles Dexter Ball, *Pioneer Churches of the Santa Ana District* (Santa Ana, Cal., 1932).

48. Ray Risdon, “Interesting Items,” *El Mexicano*, 1913.

49. J.C. Nava, “Memoirs,” *Journal of the Latin American Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1922, 37–38.

50. Margaret R. Seebach, *Land of All Nations* (New York: Council of Women for Home Missions, and Missionary Education Movement, 1924), 121–22.

arms. With a growing population of Mexican immigrants and refugees arriving stateside, as well as migrants from Puerto Rico and Cuba, Protestants had an expanded mission field among Spanish speakers in their midst. Protestant missions to Latin America, which had seen minimal growth previously, were also experiencing growth. Latinx populations in the West were a key hub of Latin American mission work, with important links across borders. The Gonzales lineage was useful in inspiring this work.

Seebach's account, one of the few purporting to relay direct quotes from the Hispano patriarch, reinforced familiar Protestant mission themes of conversion and rupture, including criticism of neighbors "who were ignorant and superstitious, believing in all sorts of charms and witchcraft."⁵¹ It is lost to time whether these descriptions were embellishments from Seebach, or terms that A. C. Gonzales either relayed from his grandfather or reconstructed of his own accord. Still, there is an uncanny link to the Bible being described as charm, a phrasing attributed to Ambrosio Gonzales by Harwood, and the railing against charms in Seebach's work. The Bible, for Protestants, was a powerful antidote to the folk charms of Hispanos, and Ambrosio Gonzales served as a model of Hispano Protestant faith in regard to these religious boundaries. Protestant readers, especially, were invited into the inspiring account of how the legacy of Ambrosio Gonzales manifested in one of Methodism's brightest stars of the era, none other than his grandson Rev. A. C. Gonzales. As his grandfather did, A. C. Gonzales broke new ground as a Protestant leader in a new territory, demonstrating that this movement West might have greater implications for Latin America.

The extending of Gonzales's legacy became ever clear as I engaged in collecting oral histories in Southern California within Latinx congregations. The legacy especially came through in a conversation with Alfonso Olivos, a congregant from Santa Ana in his eighties. I sat across from Olivos as we shared a meal and discussed the history of the Mexican Methodist Church of Santa Ana, once pastored by Rev. A. C. Gonzales. Olivos's family were longtime members of the modern iteration of the Mexican Methodist Church, now known as El Gethsemaní UMC. Alfonso Olivos's father, Louis Olivos, was a well-known entertainer, theater owner, and businessman in Santa Ana and his grandfather, Hilario Olivos, had been a founding member of the Mexican Methodist Church in Santa Ana. Alfonso shared with me a copy of a receipt Hilario received for donating \$100 toward purchasing

51. *Ibid.*, 119.

a new church building from a Mormon congregation in 1912. After this purchase, the Mexican Methodist church became a hub of religious and cultural activity in the region thanks in part to A. C. Gonzales. Olivos noted past political and business leaders who had links to his Methodist congregation. He also recalled an occasion when civil rights leader Cesar Chavez spoke at the church after a last-minute change of venue due to a threat posed to Chavez. These observations corroborated the conclusions of Helen Walker, a researcher studying Santa Ana's Mexican community, who noted that an ethnic enclave had formed around the Mexican Methodist church in Santa Ana.⁵²

The Gonzales family held space in Alfonso Olivos's memory. When A. C. Gonzales migrated to Santa Ana to fulfill his pastoral role, members of his extended family migrated with him, settled in Santa Ana, and participated in church life. His mother, Flora Chavez de Gonzales, is buried in Santa Ana today. While Olivos was too young to have met A. C. Gonzales, he held fond memories of other Gonzales family members. A. C. moved on from his pastoral role in Santa Ana to a Methodist congregation in Pasadena, his final assignment before his death. Members of the Gonzales family, however, remained in Santa Ana and continued to play integral roles in the life of the city and the Methodist Church for years to come. Olivos particularly recalled Solomon Gonzales, A. C. Gonzales's brother, an important businessman in Santa Ana who did much for the city. Commemoration of the family had moved beyond traditional church accounts and made it into local newspapers as well as Walker's research.⁵³

CULTIVATED IN TENSION

The history of chile peppers in New Mexico presents some novel parallels to the commemoration of Ambrosio Gonzales. The chiles that Gonzales's relative used to irritate the congregants of the PMM had likely been cultivated in the region for over two centuries. Oddly enough, though chiles are native to the Americas, the types emblematic of the region were not native to the Southwest. Spanish settler Juan de Oñate and his entourage to New Mexico brought chiles with them from Mesoamerica. Although Spanish and Native populations cultivated chiles in New Mexico, the modern-day New Mexican

52. Helen Walker, "The Conflict of Cultures in First Generation Mexicans in Santa Ana, California" (Master's thesis, University of Southern California, 1928).

53. Walker, "The Conflict of Cultures"; Hoiles, "Saturday Evening."

chile—a hybrid—was developed at New Mexico State University, under the direction of horticulturist Dr. Fabian Garcia.⁵⁴ As geographer Terrence Haverluck chronicles, Garcia developed chile hybrids that were environmentally robust, larger than previous strains, and consistently spicy. Garcia envisioned that if his chiles became the main ingredient in dishes such as *rellenos* or *chile verde*, they would be a profitable crop, especially since “milder chiles could be marketed to Anglos.”⁵⁵

Might Hispano Protestantism mirror the modern cultivation of the chile, introduced to the region by settler-colonial efforts, reliant on local practices and eco-systems, and eventually made more palatable to a wider audience? As A. C. Gonzales persistently carried his grandfather’s faith legacy West, he carried the trials and errors that shaped his own faith. Gonzales the senior became emblematic of a tradition, as one who persevered. The chile is emblematic of a region, as if it has always been there—as if it too has always persevered in its present form. Still, just as the story of Latinx Protestantism is tied to the legacy of Gonzales, it is also tied to the dissident relative, the woman who weaponized the chile in an act of protest. When cultivating a crop, the types and strains that do not take, amid instances of pain, trauma, and dislocation, are also part of the story and must be reckoned with. The de-conversions and counter-versions enacted in the process, they too shape the harvest. The image rendered by Gloria Anzaldúa is a fitting one: “We are the grinding motion, the mixed potion, *somos el molcajete*. We are the pestle, the *comino*, *ajo*, *pimienta*, We are the chile Colorado, the green shoot that cracks the rock. We will abide.” The West became a testing ground for American religion, a place where new strains and new harvests were envisioned. Those who did not find themselves in the dominant strain, in the dominant story, often sought alternative ways to remain rooted.⁵⁶

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54. Kelly Culler (Urig), *New Mexico Chiles: History, Legend and Lore* (Arcadia Publishing, 2015).

55. Terrence W. Haverluck, “Chile Peppers and Identity Construction in Pueblo, Colorado,” *Journal for the Study of Food and Society* 6, no. 1 (March 1, 2002): 45–59, 46.

56. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 81–82.