

**Azusa Street & Beyond: 100 Years of Commentary  
on the Global Pentecostal/Charismatic Movement,**  
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## **The Roots and Theology of Pentecostalism (1)**

The twentieth century resurgence of revivalist evangelicalism was not anticipated. For decades secular scholars had difficulty taking it seriously and integrating it into their understanding of the American past. They believed that it would wither in the bright sun of modern culture. Contrary to expectations, evangelicalism with its great diversity is very much in evidence. It has not fallen away, as expected, but has survived and staged an impressive comeback, establishing itself firmly in American culture.

### **The Azusa Street Revival**

Most of the dramatic church growth in the twentieth century has taken place in Pentecostal and independent Pentecostal-like churches. In 1901, the Pentecostal movement began in Topeka, Kansas, when a woman was the first to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the gift of tongues. After a slow start it spread like bush fire in America. In April 1906, a remarkable event happened in Los Angeles, California. It takes its name from its location – Azusa Street – that became a byword to thousands of devout men and women who mingled with the merely curious between 1906 and 1908 at a modest building known as the Azusa Street Mission. Their leader was William J. Seymour, a black preacher, who had recently arrived in the city with a new twist on revival preaching. His message was a summary of what his mentor, Charles Parham, a Midwestern-healing evangelist taught. Parham had concluded that the Biblical evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit was speaking in tongues. Along with the traditional revival rhetoric about sin and salvation and pursuit of holiness, Seymour offered verifiable "Bible evidence" for his views on the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and set his message in the context of an end-times restoration of the apostolic faith.

At Azusa Street seekers prayed for the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which they expected would be attested by speaking in tongues. The sick came in for healing, the curious and scoffers came too, drawn by newspaper cartoons or word-of-mouth, and perhaps by the bedlam and noise. Startling claims became commonplace among the faithful: from visions to the ability to converse readily in unknown foreign languages. Seymour and his followers concluded that they held centre stage in God's plan for the last days. They were convinced that the events experienced at the Azusa Street Mission were clear evidence of a "new Pentecost" – a long-awaited "restoration of the faith once delivered to the saints." Their name, "Apostolic Faith Movement", demonstrated their conviction that they were the continuation of the apostolic Acts 2 experience; the label "Pentecostal" came a little later and pointed to the centrality of the first Christian Pentecost in their self-understanding. In the early stages Pentecostalism was already an urban movement. It took roots not only in rural areas but also in scores of gospel tabernacles, unused downtown mainline denominational churches, neighbourhood stores fronts, and other urban facilities.

### **Pentecostal Theology**

The distinctive mark of the Pentecostal Movement is speaking in tongues. Prophecy, interpretation, and other supernatural manifestations of the Holy Spirit are also central to its

theology. Their textbook for faith and practice often boils down to the Book of Acts. Ray Hughes, a leading Pentecostal, claims, "Just as in the book of Acts and within the New Testament, Pentecostal preaching today will produce signs and wonders. It will change lives and bring revival."

Pentecostalism is a movement of great diversity, complexity and bewildering variety. For example, the Oneness group baptizes in the name of Jesus only and not in the name of the Trinity. Pentecostals emphasize the central evangelical doctrines of the complete authority of the Bible and the necessity of a conversion experience. They confess that Jesus Christ is Saviour, Sanctifier, Spirit Baptizer, Healer and Coming King. They firmly believe in the lostness of man. Sin is a reality, which can only be taken care of through the transfer of the offender's guilt to Christ, and the transfer of Christ's righteousness to the believer. Pentecostal theology stresses the judgment of God, the imminence of Christ's return, and the indispensability of the empowerment by the Holy Spirit. It is experience oriented. What Pentecostals value highly is a personal experience of the Holy Spirit. This spiritual experience is considered more important than issues of doctrine and church government.

Pentecostals stress holiness. The challenges of our decadent age are met by stressing personal separation from evil. They believe in the importance of a holy life, freed particularly from bar-room vices such as drinking, dancing, card playing, and impurity. For them, this strong emphasis on holiness is not a cross to be borne, but a cherished delight. In fact, separation from the world often becomes an important test of genuine faith.

Since experience and feelings are so important, Pentecostal worship services have become known for their exuberance and innovative practices. This Pentecostal worship "style" has also influenced the "traditional" churches. Dr. Joel Carpenter, director of the Nagel Institute for the Study of World Christianity at Calvin College, notes that praise-teams, overhead projectors and an emphasis on spiritual experience have made their way into Protestant denominations, including the Christian Reformed Church. But I believe there is something profoundly amiss in the notion that the church must abandon age-long worship traditions and reconstruct them to "appeal" to the experiences of a new generation. What is contemporary usually becomes temporary.

Right from the beginning, women had a vital role in the spread of Pentecostalism. They were ordained, preached, went out as missionaries, evangelized, and conducted crusades. For example, by 1925 women made up 64.4 percent of the appointed Assemblies of God (AG) missionaries. But the official position of the General Council of the Assemblies of God USA on women ministers changed several times before full ordination was granted in 1935. The three earliest Bible institutes that most strongly influenced the course of AG were founded by women and were distinctively Pentecostal. Grant McClung, an international missions leader with Church of God World Missions (Cleveland, Tennessee), observes: "A large part of the dynamic growth of the Pentecostal Movement is due to its ability since its inception to mobilize and effectively deploy women into missionary service."

Pentecostals believe that the coming of the Spirit brings an ability to do "signs and wonders," particularly that of healing and miracles. Early twentieth-century Pentecostal newsletters and periodicals abounded with "thousands of testimonies to physical healings, exorcism and deliverances." McClung points out that divine healing is "an evangelistic door-opener" for Pentecostals. But for some, faith in God's power to heal directly through prayer has resulted in a rejection of other methods of healing. And often, those who are not healed in a service are told

they lack faith. However, it seems that the central role given to healing is probably no longer a prominent feature of western Pentecostalism, but it still is in the developing world, where the problems of disease, evil, and lack of medical facilities affect the whole community.

Pentecostalism has been strongly influenced by the premillennial/dispensational view of the second coming of Christ. Reference to the imminence of Christ's return punctuated the revival's rhetoric and fueled enthusiasm for evangelism. Early Pentecostals were certain they were living in the end-time restoration of New Testament apostolic power. For example, Seymour declared that the Azusa Street revival is "the last revival before the coming of the Lord, and that, for them, all earthly history would soon be consummated by the 'Rapture.'" The early Pentecostals reasoned that signs and wonders were powerful indications of Christ's imminent return. Little wonder, then, that they evangelized with such explosive dynamism. Many even departed immediately, without adequate financing or missionary training, to far-flung destinations. This strong conviction of Christ's soon coming again impacted Pentecostal missionary practice. In fact, it is still proceeding from an inherent "last day mission theology." And throughout Pentecostal literature, yet today, one finds references to a "last-day ministry", or that "time is growing short", or that the second coming of Christ will "be very, very soon."

## **The Spread of Pentecostalism (2)**

The Pentecostal movement made phenomenal numerical gains worldwide after its humble beginnings at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1982, C. Peter Wagner, a former missionary to Latin America, even predicted, "If the Lord tarries, Pentecostalism will undoubtedly go down in future history as the most significant religious phenomenon of the twentieth century." Grant McClung, claims evidence indicates that, although the 1906 Azusa Street Pentecostal gifting was a necessary step toward empowering the believers for mission, the ultimate reason and goal for them was world evangelization among the unreached. William J. Seymour, the recognized leader of the Azusa Street Mission, thus would often exhort his people, "Now, do not go from this meeting and talk about tongues, but try to get people saved."

## **Mission Fervour**

The early missionaries inspired by the Azusa Street experience set sail for remote places with little thought for mundane matters like financial support, a firm destination, or suitable supplies. They went often with only a one-way ticket to their destination. A fervent belief in the pre-millennium return of Christ and His command to evangelize to the uttermost parts of the world was a strong motivating factor. Many were convinced there was no time to lose. Why should they buy a return ticket if the Lord is going to return at any moment? For example, the Crouch family left in 1912 for Egypt on a one-way trip. "The Crouch party went most at their own expense, expecting to remain until the rapture, which they believed was very near at hand." And why learn new languages if Acts 2 says the Holy Spirit gifted the early church with the ability to be understood by one and all? Consequently, the early twentieth century American Pentecostals were convinced that the gift of tongues was God's way of enabling them to preach the Gospel in the mother tongues of peoples all over the world. There was no need for the time-consuming labour to learn another language. The early Pentecostals firmly believed that "the gift of languages is given with the commission, 'Go ye into the world and preach the Gospel to every creature'." Reports proliferated of tongues-enabled impromptu conversation with immigrants. For example, a young southern Californian named Lillian Keys professed the ability to converse with local Chinese immigrants in two distinct dialects. "God is solving the missionary problems," an unsigned column in the *Apostolic Faith* editorialized in 1906, "sending out new-

tongues missionaries ...without purse or script, and the Lord is going before them preparing the way." But the disappointing reality that the Holy Spirit-inspired zeal for missions did not mean instant facility in an unknown language soon became embarrassingly evident. Many returned home, disillusioned and frustrated with their inability to communicate in a foreign language and in a different culture. But despite the set-backs, the early Pentecostals soldiered on. They learned from their experiences and changed mission strategy. In retrospect McClung can claim, "Pentecostalism cannot be properly or accurately described without understanding its own *self-identity* as a missionary movement raised up by God to evangelize the world in the last days."

## The Developing World

Pentecostals are main role players in world missions, representing perhaps a quarter of the world's Christians and perhaps three quarters of them are in the developing world. They even have been labelled the *third force* in modern Christianity. But they see themselves not as a "third force" or a "fringe movement". In their view they are New Testament Christians returning to the simplicity, central truths, and vitality of the Apostolic Era. Western Pentecostals do not have the same accent on supernatural and charismatic phenomena as non-western Pentecostals. In non-western cultures, less influenced by the stifling spirit of secularism, the vivid world of spiritual warfare is a reality. They speak about exorcising demons, encountering the divine in dreams and visions. They testify of healings, words of wisdom, prophecies, tongues, and interpretation of tongues. In few places has the growth been faster than in Latin America. It has typically been among the most disadvantaged or dissatisfied sectors, such as the peasantry, the urban poor, women, Indians and ethnic minorities, young adults, and the independent middle-class groups. History shows that Pentecostalism spreads without benefit of institutions, and its non-western forms often articulate new social and political, as well as spiritual, agendas. Besides an emphasis on supernatural, many Pentecostals also try to combine the word with the deed. For example, in Brazil, Pentecostal churches have established orphanages and homes for the elderly. The larger churches have commissaries to aid the poor.

The African continent is also a scene of the rapid growth. About 85 million Pentecostal and charismatic Christians can be found in Africa today. They are growing about 4.5 percent annually, nearly double the continent's overall rate of population growth. A hundred years ago, there was only a handful. But African Pentecostalism suffers from lack of a Christian worldview. For example, many inhabitants in southern Nigeria belong to various forms of Pentecostal Christianity, but at the same time southern Nigeria is also rife with corruption and the "health and wealth-gospel" version of Pentecostalism is very popular. Unfortunately, this type of Pentecostal exuberance does not connect with the daily routine of business, government and education. I will comment further on this phenomenon in the concluding article.

In Seoul, Korea, one can find the world's largest church. Its founder, Paul Yonggi Cho, was raised as a Buddhist. He rejected his Buddhist religion as he was dying of tuberculosis and longed to become a medical doctor. He claims that one night Jesus appeared to him dressed as a fireman, called him to preach, and filled him with the Holy Spirit. In 1966, he became the general superintendent of the Korean Assemblies of God. By the end of 1987, his Yoido Full Gospel Church boasted a membership of over half a million. The church has hundreds of assistant pastors and thousands of home cell group leaders, the majority of both groups being women. Cho's success formula is a combination of the power of positive thinking and positive confession. He teaches that through the power of the spoken word the Spirit-led believer can "create and release the presence of Jesus Christ." He also believes in "prosperity religion". He states, "God wants us to be blessed materially, also." And he argues that "without signs and

wonders, the church cannot grow." He states, "I have seen souls saved, broken hearts healed, physical diseases touched by the power of the Holy Spirit. In addition, I have seen many people become successful after the Holy Spirit came into their lives." But not all Pentecostals are enamoured by "the health and wealth gospel." In his article *Towards a Pentecostal Missiology for the Majority World*, published in the *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* (Jan. 2005), Allan Anderson comments,

"Pentecostal missiologists need to critically evaluate those 'evangelistic ministries' that lead to self-aggrandizement and financial gain of the preacher, often at the expense of people who have very little to give."

Anderson also mentions that for decades Pentecostals lacked a distinctive "Pentecostal missiology". He notes that no discernible formal organization or structures appeared in Pentecostal missions until comparatively recently, and Pentecostal missions have been known for their "creative chaos". He points out that Pentecostal missions are grounded first and foremost in the conviction that the Holy Spirit is the motivating power behind all this activity. They place primary emphasis on being "sent by the Spirit" and depend more on what is described as the Spirit's leading than on formal structures. Pentecostals become missionaries because they believe the Spirit directed them to do it, often through some spiritual revelation like a prophecy, a dream or a vision.

### **Unabated Spread**

The spread of Pentecostalism goes on unabated. New technologies, ease of travel, recent immigration, and the breakdown of denominational loyalty have given new appeal to these forms of Pentecostalism in the West. Now, a century after the Azusa Street revival, no one knows how many Pentecostal Christians there are. In the United States, Pentecostal denominations boast over 10 million members. If one adds those in other denominations, who embrace Pentecostal-like beliefs and practices, the number more than doubles. We can also point to post-denominational groups such as the Vineyard churches and many independent churches in Africa, China and Latin American. In addition, estimates suggest at least 500 million adherents abroad, making Pentecostals the second largest group of Christians in the world, trailing only Roman Catholics. By the end of the 20th century, the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement had an amazing variety of 11,000 Pentecostal denominations and 3,000 independent Charismatic denominations around the world. Such numbers are notoriously difficult to verify, but by any measure Pentecostalism has experienced notable dramatic growth. At the current rate of growth, some researchers predict there will be 1 billion Pentecostals by 2025, most located in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

### **Azusa Street & Beyond (3)**

Looking at the Church from today's perspective, she looks old. She already topped her two thousand years of existence since Christ's first coming to earth. Many secular pundits think the time has come for the church to "pack it in." The Church's demise has been predicted many times, but in truth she is neither dead nor dying. The Lord is still worshipped in churches around the world. The ancient *Apostles' Creed* is still being repeated. And even the current debate about prophecies, speaking in tongues (glossolalia), signs and wonder is not new. While it is not widely recognized, the Pentecostal movement that caught fire in the Azusa Street revival had its predecessors.

## Pentecostal Predecessors

The second century Montanus fell into a trance and reportedly began to prophesy under the influence of the "Spirit". He believed he was the chosen instrument of the Spirit to prepare the church for the second coming. Two young women also prophesied, and the movement quickly spread through Asia Minor. By the middle of the fourth century, it seemed to be a thing of the past. In the Middle Ages, there appeared several possible examples of speaking in tongues. The German abbess, Hildegard's (1098-1179) use of unknown tongues is recorded in the *Lingua Ignota*. Francis Xavier (1506-1552), a Jesuit missionary to the East Indies and Japan, described his "miraculous" ability to communicate with various groups as "glossolalia." A widespread outbreak of this phenomenon occurred among a group of persecuted Huguenots in southern France at the end of the seventeenth century. This lasted a little over a decade. In the 1730s, a similar occurrence took place among the Jansenists, a group of Augustinian Roman Catholics priests. Glossolalia also occurred under the ministry of Presbyterian, Edward Irving in London, England. In Russia, a Pentecostal-type movement began in the 1850s and apparently continued throughout the century. The major contributor to the rise of American Pentecostalism was the worldwide Holiness movement, which had developed out of nineteenth century American Methodism with its emphasis on a "second blessing" crisis of sanctification through the "baptism in the Holy Spirit." English evangelicals also stressed a separate Holy Spirit experience in the Keswick Conventions beginning in 1874. As the twentieth century dawned, the American evangelical R.A. Torrey (1856-1928), the famous evangelist D.L. Moody's "lieutenant" and Keswick supporter, secured signatures from some of the nation's most prominent clergy to covenant and pray for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The 1904 Welsh revival also experienced glossolalia. In his memoir, *I Saw the Welsh Revival 1904 – Centenary Edition – 2004*, David Matthews writes about the marvellous effusion of the Holy Spirit which occurred in Wales during the years 1904-05 under the leadership of Mr. Evan Roberts, which shook the whole nation. At every service he emphasized the sentence, "Obey the Holy Spirit...Be filled with the Holy Spirit...Do not grieve the Holy Spirit by disobedience." When the revival was at its height, many left their homes on the impulse of the moment, claiming to have received a vision, which called them to give up all and follow the Lord.

This concise overview of the predecessors of the 1906 Azusa Street experience shows the latter has a place in the story of how contemporary Christianity developed, but its story is but one piece in the narrative of exploding Christianity. All the revivals featured confession of sin and summoned Christians to purity of heart and life. However, the view that speaking in tongues *always* manifested Spirit baptism set Azusa Street Mission, formally known as the Apostolic Faith Mission, apart from previous other revivals, some of which also included tongue speaking and various spiritual gifts. And so Azusa Street was one of a series of scattered contemporary renewals with powerful implications for popular Christian spirituality.

## Critique

Already in its time, the Azusa Street revival received its share of criticism. Some critics charged that the revival divided rather than united the Church. At the end of 1906, a Los Angeles pastor noted, "In the city there are already four hostile camps of those who unduly magnify the tongues, which prove that the tongues have not brought Pentecost to Los Angeles. When Pentecost comes, we shall see the union of the Lord's people." Since the early Pentecostal movement was led mainly by lay-people, not by scholars or those well grounded in the Greek New Testament, proper Biblical interpretation suffered from their inexperience. In *The Problem of Evangelical Theology*, Ben Witherington III comments, "Not surprisingly, this led to some

aberrations in the more distinctive aspects of their theologizing." Since time does not stand still, Pentecostals have now more Bible scholars in their midst, who continue to do research on the theology of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecostals often refer to the book of Acts with its records of signs, wonders, and glossolalia, as the norm for the Church today. However, it needs to be stressed that just because something is reported in Acts does not mean that it is normative for the Church, or a pattern for its universal experience. Having said this, by no means do I want to minimize the importance of spiritual gifts of which every Christian is given at least one, if not more.

Do the Acts 2 experience and the tongue phenomena exempt Pentecostals from the need to learn foreign languages? Before long, many Pentecostals questioned the missionary use of tongues. Early periodicals began to emphasize the need for language study before commencing overseas missions. The miracle of languages (speaking in tongues) was not repeated on the mission field. Like all other missionaries, Pentecostals also had to spend years learning the language and culture. If language study was not required, the Wycliffe Bible Translators' ministry would be unnecessary. Trained translators have made great sacrifices to translate the Bible into many languages.

How do we interpret glossolalia? Harry Boer argued years ago in his *Pentecost and Missions* (1961), that Pentecost is not really about spectacular signs and wonders, exorcisms, prophecies, or material prosperity. It is about an encounter with the creator God in Christ that is so vivid, so intensely personal, and so life-changing that those who experience it find it impossible to keep quiet about what they have seen and heard. In other words, Pentecost began the great missionary movement. It empowered the Church to go into all the world with the Gospel.

Although the Welsh revival and the Azusa Street saw an exodus of inexperienced novices going abroad as missionaries, in a very short time they also saw many return disillusioned. The American Pentecostals quickly realized the need for trained missionaries. They adopted the new Bible Institute approach in theological education. For example, Bible colleges in the Assemblies of God continue to play a very prominent role in the training of Assemblies of God missionary personnel. I also must point out that not all Pentecostals are impressed by the "health and wealth gospel." For example, Pentecostal leader Grant McClung recognizes that some Pentecostal/charismatic celebrities are preaching a *false* gospel of peace, power, and prosperity theology. He charges that the "prosperity gospel" is a corruption of the gospel.

### **Reformed Approach**

During the Reformation, both Martin Luther and John Calvin wrote extensively about the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. John Calvin has been called the "theologian of the Holy Spirit." He asserted that not only is the preached Word the agent of the Spirit, but the Bible is *in its essence* the Word of God. The divine origin of Scripture is certified by the testimony of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit does not operate independently of the Scripture. He works in the reading of the Scripture as well as in the preaching of the Word. The Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ unites us to Himself. Scripture teaches that the Holy Spirit is savingly present in the Church. But we must personally appropriate the Gospel and have a personal walk with God. Our fellowship with the Holy Spirit leads to a personal relationship with God the Father and the Son. And with the help of the Holy Spirit we will seek to honour God in all we do and say.

In contemporary controversies about the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we often neglect to see the broader picture. To understand the work of the Holy Spirit, we must not begin with Pentecost, but with creation. The Holy Spirit is active in all of creation. No human life is imaginable apart from the Holy Spirit. Dr. Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) points out that every creature depends on God for its existence. All creatures are maintained, moment by moment, by God's Spirit. He works in natural life, in the giving of talents. In line with Bavinck, Dr. Albert M. Wolters also notes the centrality of the doctrine of creation. He observes that the whole point of salvation is to salvage a sin-disrupted creation. The charismatic gifts "are not supernatural – that is, they are not foreign to the everyday reality God created for us." He says, "We must all seek to develop the gifts that God has given us, not forgetting that the greatest of these is love."

## **Conclusion**

The Pentecostal movement has made an extraordinary impact on the church and continues to do so. It still contributes in various ways to the life and character of the church and of churches around the world, whatever the confessional or denominational bent. For the Pentecostals, their faith experience is very much real and very much alive. We can learn from their enthusiasm for the spread of the Gospel. Furthermore, their emphasis on Biblical piety and Godly holiness is noteworthy. Reformed Christians are known for their theological debate and kingdom action. However, there is much improvement needed when it comes to a Christian lifestyle that reflects the Holiness of God.

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