



AZUSA

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Note: This is the first chapter of the author's A Guide to Pentecostal Movements for Lutherans, published this summer by Wipf & Stock. The chapters that follow are entitled: Pentecostals, Lutherans, Baptism I, Baptism II, Charismata, History, Power, Prosperity, and Experience. To learn more, visit <wipfandstock.com/a-guide-to-pentecostal-movements-for-lutherans.html>.

The news has spread far and wide that Los Angeles is being visited with a “rushing mighty wind from heaven.” The how and why of it is to be found in the very opposite of those conditions that are usually thought necessary for a big revival. No instruments of music are used, none are needed. No choir, but bands of angels have been heard by some in the Spirit and there is a heavenly singing that is inspired by the Holy Ghost. No collections are taken. No bills have been posted to advertise the meetings. No church or organization is at the back of it. All who are in touch with God realize as soon as they enter the meetings that the Holy Ghost is the leader. One brother stated that even before his train entered the city, he felt the power of the revival.¹

This is how *The Apostolic Faith*, the newspaper published by the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles, California, described the sudden outburst of spiritual gifts and gospel passion among its people in April 1906. But that’s not how the secular newspapers described it. The journalists saw only the mad antics of “holy rollers” and the indecent blurring of color lines as blacks laid hands on whites and prayed for them to receive the Holy Spirit. Ever since, the meaning of the Azusa Street revival has been disputed, not only between its proponents and skeptical critics, but between different groups of Christians as well.

How did such an extraordinary revival come about with

so little of the usual preparation, as the newspaper quotation testifies? What did people see in the plain wooden building in an unprepossessing neighborhood of Los Angeles? Why was the ministry of William J. Seymour (1870–1922) so unprecedentedly effective at fostering the growth of spiritual gifts and commitment to mission at home and abroad? How did it happen that the little Azusa Street Mission became synonymous with the rise of Pentecostalism, a movement that now claims half a billion members or more?

To start answering these questions, we need to back up a bit and take a look at nineteenth-century American Christianity.

During this period, despite the presence of all kinds of Christians in America as well as people with no Christian convictions at all, the dominant theology was Methodist, as formulated by the eighteenth-century itinerant English preacher John Wesley (1703–1791). Even non-Methodist churches with no apparent fondness for Methodist theology, like the Reformed, were deeply influenced by it. The early part of the nineteenth century was marked by what is called the Second Great Awakening: a time of renewed religious commitment, camp meetings, tent revivals, dramatic conversions, emotional repentance, and intense hopes for the future. (The First Great Awakening, in the eighteenth century, took place mainly in the northeastern part of the country and mainly involved people who were already church members.) Many believed that the return of Christ in judgment was imminent and that the millennium-long reign of his saints was on the way. The arrival of the eschaton was intensely desired.

The mood of American Christianity was optimistic. It believed in the perfectibility of the Christian, a conviction inherited from Wesley as explained in his treatise, *A Brief Account of Christian Perfection*. This teaching was

given a renewed American impetus by Asa Mahan (1799–1889), college president and author of *The Scripture Doctrine of Christian Perfection*, and by revivalist preacher Phoebe Palmer (1807–1874). For them, it was not enough to say that sin had been forgiven. Methodist doctrine taught that the dominion of sin over the believer could be fully destroyed; that the inclination to sin could be conquered. Early nineteenth-century American Christianity likewise believed in the perfectibility of human society, giving rise to all kinds of reform movements toward temperance, the abolition of slavery, and education. Many people believed that God would not withhold any good thing from His children if they earnestly desired and prayed for it, sinlessness included. Holiness churches, an offshoot of Methodism, grew in size and importance as they promoted these teachings.

It is important to note that the assumption of this kind of Christianity is one of adult conversion. The ancient civilizations and folk churches of the Middle East and Europe, where Christianity was so fully incorporated into the life of the society that the baptism of infants was often required by law, no longer made any sense on the American frontier. Colonial American culture was one without ancient institutions, intoxicated by the opportunity for a fresh start, based on personal commitment and decision rather than law or custom. Baptism, therefore, was understood to be the result of a conscious adult experience of regeneration by God. Baptism was not primarily a church ritual or an act of God but a public witness to an internal spiritual event. (The Lutheran Confessions also speak frequently of regeneration, but they assume it will be subsequent to, and in part the result of, baptism, which in the sixteenth-century European context was nearly always infant baptism.)

But following the Methodist line of thought, it was not enough to turn to God in faith at regeneration. Wesley's logic was simple: God wants us to love

Him completely, and God can accomplish what He intends. Why should we assume that we convert to Christ only to be continually defeated by sin? God can conquer the sin in us, even now upon this earth. Thus the Holiness movement came more and more to emphasize a “second work of grace” after justification or conversion, which they called “entire sanctification.” Whereas Reformed and Lutheran Protestants understood sanctification to be a gradual, lifelong process to be completed only at the resurrection of

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the dead, Holiness Christians understood it to be as instantaneous and experiential as conversion itself.

The optimistic mood of American Christianity was well matched by the growth of both science and industry, but it didn't last as long as the other two. The biggest and bitterest blow was the American Civil War (1861–1865). Approximately 620,000 people lost their lives in this conflict—which was two percent of the entire American population at the time—and that on top of four hundred years of the enslavement and horrific maltreatment of persons of African descent.

By the time it was all over, even the most fervent Christian had a hard time expecting the best of the human race. And yet the hopes of decades past didn't simply dry up and disappear. Other explanations were sought and, above all, deeper experiences of God.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, a new teaching began to make the rounds in Holiness churches. Benjamin Hardin Irwin (1854–c. 1920s) had experienced both regeneration and entire sanctification, but during his preaching journeys he had a third experience, which he called a “baptism by fire” or “baptism in the Holy Spirit.” The believers that gathered around him accordingly called themselves the Fire-Baptized movement. Most Holiness churches quickly rejected Irwin and his “third work” teaching. Indeed, due to his excessively creative ideas about “dynamite,” “lyddite,” and “oxidite” baptisms, plus a moral scandal, he fell from the radar and died in obscurity. Still, his notion of a “third blessing” or “third experience of grace” after conversion and sanctification began to gain ground. The third blessing idea was particularly vital in such denominations as the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) and the Pentecostal Holiness Church, with which the Fire-Baptized churches eventually merged. At this point in time, though, “Pentecostal” did not yet mean what we mean by it today.

Then another person came on the scene: Charles Fox Parham (1873–1929). He started out as a preacher in a Methodist church but in time was attracted to Holiness teaching. He eventually struck out on his own with a ministry of divine healing—another prominent theme of nineteenth-century American Christianity. During a visit to a Holiness commune in the northeastern United States, Parham heard about missionaries who had received xenolalia: the miraculous gift of speech in a foreign language, akin to what took place on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. (Xenolalia is to be

distinguished from glossolalia, which is speech in the tongues “of angels” or otherwise incomprehensible speech.)

Suddenly all the pieces fell into place for Parham. If you could speak a foreign language, you could instantly become a missionary. Jesus had said that the gospel must first be preached to all nations (Mark 13:10), and once that had happened he would come again in glory (13:26). If xenolalia was being bestowed upon believers, it must be in preparation for the final missionary push and, therefore, the end times. It was not simply a private experience of edification but an equipping for service.

Parham opened a school in Topeka, Kansas, in the American heartland, where he challenged his students to find hard-and-fast proof of Spirit baptism. Plenty of people in Holiness circles by now were talking of being baptized in the Spirit, which they equated with the second work of grace, namely entire sanctification. But Parham and his students together became convinced that speaking in tongues was *the* proof of baptism in the Spirit, or, as it was later doctrinally defined by the newborn Pentecostal churches, tongues was the “initial evidence” or “initial physical evidence” or “Bible evidence” of Spirit baptism. A search for absolute certainty—whether of salvation, sanctification, or anything else—was a longstanding theme in American Christianity, and evidential tongues accompanying Spirit baptism fit neatly into the pattern. Parham and his students started praying for the gift, and on January 1, 1901, one of the students, Agnes Ozman, spoke in tongues. The same happened to Parham himself and about half the other students over the next few days. Despite Parham’s passionate evangelistic efforts, though, few people joined them, and the Apostolic Faith movement, as he called it, languished in obscurity for some time.

A few years later the movement began to pick up again, though at its height it never had more than ten thousand members. Internal conflict

also began to fester, and other leaders soon eclipsed Parham. A probably false accusation of moral misdeeds sealed his fate. But what limited his reach most was his unchangeable conviction that the gift of tongues was always xenolalia. The problem was that, almost without exception, Spirit-baptized missionaries quickly discovered they’d been mistaken about their ability to speak in foreign languages! Whatever they were speaking, it wasn’t a known foreign language.

The main reason Parham is remembered today is because of William J. Seymour, the aforementioned preacher of Azusa Street. Seymour

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had grown up in the largely Catholic world of Louisiana, the son of ex-slaves. As an adult he traveled north in search of work and became involved with Methodist Episcopal and Evening Light Saints churches. He was a premillennialist awaiting the imminent return of Christ, and a believer in “special revelation”—probably inherited from slave Christianity—meaning divine direction granted through dreams, visions, voices, and trances. This did *not* mean, however, additions to the revelation granted in Holy Scripture. All such special revelations were to be tested against the Bible and repudiated if found to be at odds with it.

In the course of his wanderings,

Seymour came to Parham’s school looking for answers to his religious questions. Parham, an avowed racist, would only allow Seymour to sit in the hallway and listen; the black man couldn’t be in the same room as everyone else.

Despite the discrimination, Seymour listened attentively and took Parham seriously. He himself had experienced entire sanctification and believed, like most other Holiness Christians, that this experience had included baptism in the Spirit. It seemed only logical: how could you be entirely sanctified *without* having been baptized in the Spirit? But then, Christ himself was entirely sinless and yet he also needed to be baptized in the Spirit—and that, significantly, was the inauguration of his ministry. Holiness stressed perfection and cleansing, but it said little of missionary power and equipping. That was the missing piece. Seymour was convinced, but he himself had not yet received what was now being called the “third blessing” when he left Parham’s company.

In 1906, while still studying at Parham’s school, Seymour received an invitation to become the pastor of a Holiness church in California. He arrived in Los Angeles in February of that year and started teaching that baptism in the Spirit was an equipping for ministry, not a gift of purity or sanctification—that, in fact, it was a third work of grace. Saying so got him promptly locked out of the church. Those who’d invited him in the first place came to regard him as a heretic.

But another family in the congregation had mercy on Seymour and took him in. At a Bible study hosted by the family, he continued to teach that there were three works of grace, and that baptism in the Spirit only followed upon the first two works of conversion and sanctification. This eventually became known as the doctrine of subsequence: an important affirmation that sanctification and Spirit baptism are not the *cause* but the *result* of salvation, and that all three are the work of God. Believers could pray for Spirit

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baptism, tarry for it (long periods of prayer and worship with other believers), and yearn for it, but God was the one Who gave it. They would know when they'd received it—it was not a silent or unnoticed kind of event—and the proof would be speaking in tongues. Seymour crucially differed from Parham on the nature of these tongues: he believed they were not xenolalia, as in Acts 2, but glossolalia, as in 1 Corinthians 14. The distinction between sanctification and Spirit bap-

tism, and understanding the latter as an empowerment for mission, is what set Seymour's teaching apart from the classical Holiness position. And this is what came to be defined as specifically Pentecostal.

In April, Seymour's teaching came rapidly and dramatically to flower. Participants in the Bible study began to speak in tongues. A few days later, Seymour himself finally did too. Almost at once visitors came to see what was happening, and within a

week it became necessary to rent the space on Azusa Street.

The Mission was soon abuzz with activity. There were Bible studies every day, prayer meetings in people's homes and in camps outside the city, local evangelistic outreach, and of course frequent worship. The worship style was in the classic African-American pattern of call-and-response preaching and impassioned singing and prayer. Mark 16 and Acts 2:4 were favorite texts of Seymour's, and he quoted Isaiah more than any other book of the Bible. The Lord's Supper was celebrated often, as was foot-washing, another Holiness distinctive. Baptism was performed by full immersion in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Speaking and singing in tongues were both common, as were more unusual signs of having fallen under the Spirit's power, such as trances and dancing. These were the sorts of things that drew the scorn of the secular press, but they equally drew seekers from all races and all social classes. Women were as active in Azusa's ministry as men. Long-term Christians and seasoned clergy were as attracted to the revival as those who were not yet baptized believers. The sheer fact of a racially integrated congregation was a miracle at that period in American history.

Seymour's leadership was nothing short of extraordinary. He struck a balance that was nicely expressed in the mission's newspaper: "If there is too much reading of the Word without prayer, you get too argumentative, and if you pray too much without reading, you get fanatical."² Seymour taught the tripartite conversion-sanctification-Spirit baptism pattern, but his orientation was always obedience to God, not the accomplishment of religious phenomena. "Do not seek for tongues," he said, "but for the promise of the Father, and pray for the baptism with the Holy Ghost, and God will throw in the tongues according to Acts 2:4."³

Though he preached regularly, Sey-

mour deliberately made room for lay leadership and even for competing and dissenting voices. One visitor actually got up to denounce the whole revival and in the very process found himself being converted! While Seymour was well aware of the mixed motives of the human heart and insisted on regular scriptural discernment of all developments, he equally recognized the need to trust and nourish other Christians in their own callings. The result was that, while only fifty to sixty people formed the long-term core of the congregation, thousands more passed through the Mission and in so doing heard their own call to Christian ministry. Countless people departed Azusa Street directly for points overseas and devoted their entire lives to global mission.

Despite Seymour's irenic and humble approach to ministry, the Azusa Street Mission was not without conflict. Quite the contrary. Charles Parham visited about six months after the revival got underway and was downright horrified by what he saw. Undoubtedly spurred by his racist dislike of the African-American character of the worship, especially the more demonstrative aspects of it, he tried to stage a takeover of the Mission. The regulars wouldn't hear of it, so Parham opened his own competing church nearby, to little success.

Two years later, probably due to jealousy over Seymour's marriage, one of the Azusa Street leaders named Clara Lum absconded with most of the equipment and the mailing list for *The Apostolic Faith* and set up her own Pentecostal mission in Portland, Oregon, along with another former member. All of Seymour's efforts to regain control of his newspaper failed, and

he ended up being sidelined during the explosive growth of the Pentecostal movement over the next few years.

Then in 1911, during one of Seymour's preaching tours away from home, a Chicago pastor named William H. Durham (1873–1912) was invited to preach in his absence. Durham had visited Azusa before and received the baptism in the Spirit while he was there. Seymour even prophesied on that occasion that wherever Durham went he would cause the Holy Spirit to fall upon the gathered people. But by the time he returned as a guest preacher, Durham had made a major break with classical Holiness teaching. He no longer accepted the "second work of grace," namely entire sanctification. Instead, he argued, the "Finished Work" of Christ on the cross made all of the savior's holiness available to Christians immediately at the moment of conversion. What Christ accomplished would and must be continually appropriated by the Christian over the course of life, rather than all in a single experienced moment. Durham preached this message during his visit to Azusa, but his real goal was to take over the Mission. Seymour came home early, and this time he was the one to lock out a preacher with an unacceptable message. Durham responded by starting his own mission a few blocks away, just as Parham had.

As if that weren't enough, in 1913 a camp meeting took place at nearby Arroyo Seco under the auspices of the Mission but without inviting Seymour, and at that meeting someone prophesied that Christians should baptize only in the name of Jesus, as was done in the Book of Acts, not in the trinitarian name. This practice soon spread far and wide. Before long it was

accompanied by a denial of the Trinity, claiming that Jesus alone was God. Spirit baptism was equated with both conversion *and* sanctification—it was one single salvific experience. This proved to be the most permanent and destructive split in the nascent Pentecostal movement. Those who followed the new teaching were called Oneness or Jesus' Name Pentecostals.

The Azusa Street revival lasted only about three years, from 1906 to 1909. It saw a brief flare-up again in the second decade of the twentieth century, but by the time of Seymour's death in 1922 it was marginal. In the meanwhile, Seymour had seen enough to modify his own teachings somewhat. He no longer considered tongues alone to be sufficient Bible evidence of baptism in the Spirit: a person also had to be immersed in the love of God and display the spiritual fruit of love in daily life. The washing away of the color line, which had always been important to Seymour, was one of the most important signs of the genuine work of the Spirit and the gift of love.

Despite the short duration of the revival and the ultimate inconsequence of the Azusa Street Mission to the rapidly growing Pentecostal churches, there is no doubt that Seymour and his congregation made an unprecedentedly enormous impact on world Christianity. There is almost no better example of how God uses the humble and insignificant to accomplish great things. LF

Notes

1. Quoted in Cecil M. Robeck Jr., *The Azusa Street Mission and Revival: The Birth of the Global Pentecostal Movement* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 52.
2. Quoted in Robeck, 142.
3. Quoted in Robeck, 163.