

The Azusa Street Revival...When the Fire Fell



William Joseph Seymour (1870-1922) and Frank Bartleman (1871-1936) are two names that are most associated with the Azusa Street Revival. They were different in many ways but they were both young men who had an uncommon desire to know the Lord and see His power restored to the church.

Seymour, an African American minister was born as the son of former slaves, Simon and Phyllis Seymour in Louisiana. After gaining their freedom, the Seymours continued working on a plantation.

William followed in their footsteps, growing strong in body and spirit, but receiving little formal education. He taught himself to read so he could read the Bible. He was blind in one eye, very plain, spiritual, and humble.

He lost sight of one eye after contracting smallpox, so he devoted himself to the ministry proclaiming the Gospel of the true liberty to all men and women through Jesus Christ.

In 1906 Seymour had been invited to preach in a black Nazarene church in Los Angeles pastored by a "Mrs. Hutchinson." When Seymour preached his first sermon, proclaiming the "initial evidence" theory of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, he was locked out of the Nazarene church.

His zeal was not dampened and soon the stranded preacher was then invited to stay in the home of Richard Asbury on Bonnie Brae Street until he could arrange his return to Houston. But Seymour was destined to spend the rest of his life in Los Angeles due to the tremendous revival that began shortly thereafter. He had gathered several people and started a prayer meeting in Richard Asbury's house.

The first gatherings were attended primarily by a few African American women and their husbands, but within a month, these humble prayer meetings had exploded. The Holy Spirit had begun to anoint this gathering and many people started to pray and sing in tongues.

The exponential growth soon caused the group to move to a larger building; 312 Azusa Street. This was the beginning of what became known as the Azusa Street Revival. People streamed to these meetings from all over the nation and eventually the world to witness and be a part of these meetings. Many were saved; many were healed, both in body and in soul. Many spoke in tongues; many received strength and encouragement to continue to live in holiness.

From Azusa Street, the Pentecostal flame spread to Canada under R.E. McAlister and A.H. Argue. The “Apostle of Pentecost” to Europe, T.B. Barratt, cancelled a planned trip to Azusa Street after receiving his Pentecost in New York City. Returning to Oslo, Norway, in 1906 he opened the first Pentecostal work in Europe.

From his ministry the torch was passed to Sweden, Denmark, England, Germany, and France. Less directly the fire spread to Chile under the ministry of the American Methodist missionary Dr. W.C. Hoover; to Brazil under the ministries of Daniel Berg and Gunnar Vingren; and to Russia and other Slavic nations under Ivan Voronaneff, a Russian Baptist from New York City.

Birth of Pentecostal Movement

Thus, within a short time the Azusa Street Pentecost became a worldwide move of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of the modern-day Pentecostal Movement. The five major teachings of Azusa Street served as a standard for this first wave of Pentecostals.

They were: (1) justification by faith; (2) sanctification as a definite work of grace; (3) the baptism in the Holy Spirit evidenced by speaking in other tongues; (4) divine healing “as in the atonement”; and (5) the personal premillennial rapture of the saints at the second coming of Christ.

Though many “winds of doctrine” blew at Azusa Street, Seymour and his followers continued to stress the above teachings throughout the years of the mission’s ministry.

In time, opinion in the religious world became bitterly divided over the Azusa Street revival. Although a significant proportion of the holiness movement accepted the Azusa revival as signaling the long-prayed-for Pentecost, the majority rejected Pentecostalism. The Fundamentalists rejected Pentecostalism and by 1928 had dis-fellowshipped all Pentecostals from their ranks. The vast majority of mainline Christians either knew little or nothing of the movement or dismissed it as another heresy among the “holy rollers.”

After 100 years, it is now possible to gain a better historical perspective concerning the Azusa Street revival. In the years from 1906 to 1909, during the height of the excitement, it was impossible for anyone to be objective about the events and the teachings at the mission. For those who were baptized in the Spirit and spoke in tongues, the meeting was a foretaste of a worldwide revival. For others who rejected Seymour’s teaching, the “winds of perdition” were blowing at the Azusa Street “slum” mission.

All Were on One Level

Brother Seymour was considered as a nominal leader in the Azusa Street revival. But there was no pope or hierarchy. We were brethren. We had no program; the Lord Himself was leading. We had no priest class, nor priest craft. These things have come in later, with the apostatizing of the movement. We did not even have a platform or pulpit in the beginning. All were on one level.

The ministers were servants, according to the true meaning of the word. We did not honor men for their advantage in means of education, but rather for their God-given “gifts.” He set the members in the Body. Now “An astonishing and horrible thing has been committed in the land: The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own power; and my people love to have it so. But what will you do in the end? (Jeremiah 5:30-31 NKJV). Also, “As for My people, children are their oppressors and women rule over them. O My people! Those who lead you cause you to err, and destroy the way of your paths.”

Brother Seymour generally sat behind two empty boxes, one on top of the other. He usually kept his head inside the top one during the meeting, in prayer. There was no pride there. The services ran almost continuously. Seeking souls could be found under the power almost an hour of the day or night. The place was never closed nor empty. The people came to meet God—He was always there. Hence a conscious meeting.

The meeting did not depend on the human leader. God’s presence became more and more wonderful. In the old building, with its low rafters and bare floors, God broke strong men and women to pieces, and put them together again for His glory. It was a tremendous overhauling process. Pride and self-assertion, self-importance, and self-esteem could not survive there. The religious ego preached its own funeral sermon quickly.

No subjects or sermons were ahead of time and no special speakers for such an hour. No one knew what might be coming, what God would do. All was spontaneous, ordered by the Spirit. We wanted to hear from God, through whomever He might speak. We had no respect of persons. All were equal. No flesh might glory in His presence. He could not use the self-opinionated. Those were Holy Spirit meetings, led by the Lord.

It had to start in poor surroundings to keep out selfish, human element. All came down in humility together at His feet. They all looked alike and had all things in common, in that sense at least. The rafters were low; the tall must come down. By the time they got to Azusa, they were humbled, ready for the blessing. The fodder was thus placed for the lambs, not for giraffes. All could reach it.

Another great aspect to Seymour’s remarkable leadership at Azusa was his ability to discern and trust the Holy Spirit’s leadership, and give Him the freedom that He requires. In spite of almost constant pressure from world-renowned church leaders, who came from around the globe to impose what they perceived to be needed for order and direction on the young revival, for nearly two years Seymour held the course and allowed the Holy Spirit to move in His own, often mysterious, ways. Like Evan Roberts, who was at the same time leading the great Welsh Revival, Seymour’s greatest leadership quality was his ability to follow the Holy Spirit.

Seymour and Roberts both believed that the Holy Spirit required the freedom to move through whomever He chose, not just the leadership. They both resolved to allow anyone to be used by the Lord, even the most humble believers. This sometimes brought embarrassment as immature believers took advantage of this liberty, but often it allowed the Holy Spirit to do marvelous things among them. If we really want the Holy Spirit in our midst, we must allow Him to be leader. He is after all, God.

Changed the World

This movement didn't just stay within the walls of the Azusa Street Mission building. Within nine months, many missionaries were already being sent throughout the West Coast of the United States, and thirteen missionaries departed for Africa. Just two years after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in 1906, missionaries commissioned in the Azusa Street Mission could be found in Mexico, Canada, Western Europe, the Middle East, West Africa, and several countries in Asia...South Africa, Central and Eastern Europe, and even Northern Russia.

The Azusa Street legacy has formed and fashioned many influential leaders in the Body of Christ over the past century. It was also the precursor to multiple major denominations, such as the Assemblies of God, the Church of God in Christ, and the Vineyard Christian Fellowship.

Without question, the Azusa Street Revival was one of the greatest in all of church history. It can be argued that it has not yet ended, but has gone on many different forms and in many different places. It is right for us to give honour to whom honour is due, and William J. Seymour is rightly considered one of the greatest Christian leaders of all time. He was a great leader for as long he maintained the leadership style to which he was called, not taking initiative, but being sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

We also owe a great gratitude to the great saints who led the revival at the old, broken down mission in a dirt poor neighborhood of Los Angeles. William Seymour and others were fully surrendered to God, and the Lord used them mightily to bring about a major reawakening to early 20th century America and eventually the whole world.

Recommended Reading:

Rick Joyner *The Power to Change The World, The Welsh and Azusa Street Revivals* (Morning Star Publications 2006,2008)

Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., *The Azusa Street Mission and Revival: The Birth of the Global Pentecostal Movement* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2006)

Frank Bartleman, With An Introduction by Vinson Synan- *An Eyewitness to Azusa Street*, (FL: Bridge-Logos, 1980)

Robert Liardon, *First Hand Accounts of the Revival Frank Bartleman's Azusa Street* (Destiny Image 2006)

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