

# WILLIAM J. SEYMOUR AND THE AZUSA STREET REVIVAL

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To read the newspapers in 1906, one might have wondered about all the excitement in an old building on Azusa Street in the industrial part of the city. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, a bizarre new religious sect had started with people “breathing strange utterances and mouthing a creed which it would seem no sane mortal could understand.” Furthermore, “Devotees of the weird doctrine practice the most fanatical rites, preach the wildest theories, and work themselves into a state of mad excitement.”



If that didn't grab the reader's attention, the article continued by saying that, “Colored people and a sprinkling of whites compose the congregation, and night is made hideous in the neighborhood by the howlings of the worshippers who spend hours swaying forth and back in a nerve-racking attitude of prayer and supplication.”<sup>1</sup> To top it all off, they claimed to have received the “gift of tongues,” and what's more, “comprehend the babel.”

Nonetheless, for the spiritually hungry who came from far and wide to receive their Pentecost, “the very atmosphere of heaven” had descended, according to one.

A visiting Baptist pastor said, “The Holy Spirit fell upon me and filled me literally, as it seemed to lift me up, for indeed, I was in the air in an instant, shouting, 'Praise God,' and instantly I began to speak in another language. I could not have been more surprised if at the same moment someone had handed me a million dollars.”<sup>2</sup>

Little could the subscribers of the *Times* have guessed that in years to come, historians would say that the Azusa Street revival played a major role in the development of modern Pentecostalism—a Movement that changed the religious landscape and became the most vibrant force for world evangelization in the 20th century. Azusa Street became the most significant revival of the century in terms of global perspective.

While comparable in many ways to other Pentecostal revivals at the time, several dynamics at the Apostolic Faith Mission on Azusa Street set it apart. To understand what happened and why it still has relevance for believers after nearly a century, one must look at the events leading up to the revival in Los Angeles, the leadership of William J. Seymour, and its unique features and legacy.

## The Welsh Revival

Expectancy of revival intensified in Los Angeles, California, when believers there heard about the remarkable revival in Wales, where from September 1904 to June 1905, 100,000 people were converted to Christ. For the evangelicals around the world who had been praying for the outpouring of the latter rain of the Spirit as promised by the Old Testament prophet Joel (2:23–29), the spectacular results in Wales suggested that the great end-times revival had begun. The world could now be evangelized in the power of the Spirit before the imminent return of Christ and the impending judgment on the wicked.

The news of the Wales revival piqued the interest of Joseph Smale, pastor of First Baptist Church in Los Angeles. He traveled to Wales to see the revival firsthand. After returning home and telling his congregation about the revival, he wrote that “fully two hundred of them came out of their seats and wept in penitence before the Lord.” Smale began holding daily services both in the afternoons and evenings, and continued to hammer away at the need for revival in Los Angeles and America. Church members then sought earnestly for the power of the Holy Spirit and His gifts. But after a 15-week diet of this preaching, the church board complained and Smale left to found First New Testament Church.

Another congregation, Second Baptist Church, also experienced division when Julia W. Hutchinson—an African-American—and several other members embraced the holiness belief that a second work of grace following conversion would purify the soul of its sinful nature. These new groups of believers, however, continued to pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

### **William J. Seymour**

William J. Seymour, an African-American, was born May 2, 1870, in Centerville, Louisiana, to former slaves Simon and Phillis Seymour, who raised him as a Baptist. Later, while living in Cincinnati, Ohio, he came into contact with holiness teachings through Martin Wells Knapp's God's Revivalist movement and Daniel S. Warner's Church of God Reformation movement, otherwise known as the Evening Light Saints. Believing that they were living in the twilight of human history, these Christians believed that the Spirit's outpouring would precede the rapture of the Church. They deeply impressed the young Seymour.

After moving to Houston, Seymour attended a local African-American holiness congregation pastored by Lucy F. Farrow, a former governess in the household of Charles F. Parham. Parham led the midwestern Apostolic Faith movement, the original name of the Pentecostal movement, that had begun in his Bethel Bible School in Topeka, Kansas, in January 1901. By 1905, he had relocated his base of operations to the Houston area where he conducted revivals and started another Bible school. Farrow arranged for Seymour to attend classes. However, because of the “Jim Crow” segregation laws of the time, Seymour had to listen to Parham's lectures while sitting apart from the other students. Seymour accepted Parham's view of baptism in the Holy Spirit—the belief that in every instance, God would give intelligible languages—speaking in tongues to believers for missionary evangelism.

Neeley Terry, an African-American and member of the new congregation led by Hutchinson in Los Angeles, visited Houston in 1905 and was impressed when she heard Seymour preach. Returning home, she recommended him to Hutchinson, since the church was seeking a pastor. As a result,

Seymour accepted the invitation to shepherd the small flock. With some financial assistance from Parham, he traveled by train westward and arrived in Los Angeles in February 1906.

## **Azusa Street Revival**

Seymour immediately encountered resistance when, just 2 days after arriving, he began preaching to his new congregation that speaking in tongues was the Bible evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. On the following Sunday, March 4, he returned to the mission and found that Hutchinson had padlocked the door. Condemnation also came from the Holiness Church Association of Southern California with which the church had affiliation. Not everyone in the congregation, however, was troubled by Seymour's teaching. Undaunted, Seymour, staying at the home of church member Edward S. Lee, accepted Lee's invitation to hold Bible studies and prayer meetings there. After this, he went to the home of Richard and Ruth Asberry at 214 North Bonnie Brae Street. Five weeks later, Lee became the first to speak in tongues. Seymour then shared Lee's testimony at a gathering on North Bonnie Brae and soon many began to speak in tongues.

Word of these events traveled quickly in both the African-American and white communities. For several nights, speakers preached on the porch to the crowds on the street below. Believers from Hutchinson's mission, First New Testament Church, and various holiness congregations began to pray for the Pentecostal baptism. (Hutchinson herself was eventually baptized in the Spirit as was Seymour himself.) Finally, after the front porch collapsed, the group rented the former Stevens African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church at 312 Azusa Street in early April. A Los Angeles newspaper referred to it as a "tumble down shack." It had recently been used as a livery stable and tenement house. Discarded lumber and plaster littered the large, barn-like room on the ground floor.

The meetings at the Apostolic Faith Mission quickly caught the attention of the press due to the unusual nature of the worship. Between 300 and 350 people could get into the whitewashed 40- by 60-foot wood frame structure, with many others occasionally forced to stand outside. Church services were held on the first floor where the benches were placed in a rectangular pattern. Some of the benches were simply planks put on top of empty nail kegs. There was no elevated platform. There was no pulpit at the beginning of the revival.

Although several people could be considered leaders, the best known was the unassuming William J. Seymour. Frank Bartleman, an early participant, recalled that "Brother Seymour generally sat behind two empty shoe 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.... In that old building, with its low rafters and bare floors, God took strong men and women to pieces, and put them together again, for His glory.... The religious ego preached its own funeral sermon quickly."<sup>3</sup>

The second floor housed the office of the mission and rooms for several residents including Seymour and his wife Jenny. It also had a large prayer room to handle the overflow from the altar services below. One seeker described it as follows: "Upstairs is a long room furnished with chairs and three California redwood planks, laid end to end on backless chairs. This is the Pentecostal upper room where sanctified souls seek Pentecostal fullness and go out speaking in new tongues."<sup>4</sup>

Still, the revival advanced slowly during the summer months with only 150 people receiving “the gift of the Holy Ghost and the Bible evidence.” But this changed in the fall as the revival gained momentum and people from far and wide began to attend. Missionary Bernt Bernsten traveled all the way from North China to investigate the happenings after hearing that the promised latter rain was falling.

Stories of the revival spread quickly across North America to Europe and other parts of the world as participants traveled, testified, and published articles in sympathetic holiness publications. Particularly influential was the *Apostolic Faith* (Los Angeles), issued occasionally between September 1906 and May 1908 through the labors of Seymour and Clara Lum, editors. Distributed without charge, thousands of ministers and laypersons received copies at home and overseas: 5,000 copies of the first edition (September 1906) were printed, and by 1907 the press run reached 40,000.

Most who visited the mission came to receive the empowerment of Spirit baptism and be equipped with intelligible new languages for gospel preaching overseas. This would enable them to bypass the nuisance of formal language study. The *Apostolic Faith* reported: “God is solving the missionary problem, sending out new-tongued missionaries on the apostolic faith line, without purse or scrip, and the Lord is going before them preparing the way.” Missionaries home on furloughs also attended and spoke in tongues and in a few instances identified the languages being spoken. The recipients, however, usually depended on the Lord to identify the languages they had received.

African-Americans, Latinos, whites, and others prayed and sang together, creating a dimension of spiritual unity and equality, almost unprecedented for the time. It allowed men, women, and children to celebrate their unity in Christ and participate as led by the Spirit. Indeed, so unusual was the mixture of blacks and whites, that Bartleman enthusiastically exclaimed, “The color line was washed away in the blood.”<sup>5</sup> He meant that in the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, the sin of racial prejudice had been removed by the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ.

Meanwhile, in late summer 1906, Charles Parham had begun leading another Pentecostal revival in Zion City, Illinois, among the followers of the nationally known faith healer John Alexander Dowie. Not until October did Parham leave for California, hoping to consolidate the faithful in Los Angeles within the wider network of *Apostolic Faith* believers, and second, to harness what he considered to be an unbridled religious enthusiasm. As it happened, the emotional worship and particularly the mingling of whites and blacks together deeply offended him. Parham laid the blame at Seymour's feet.

The majority of the Azusa faithful remained loyal to Seymour after Parham left with some of the people to establish a rival mission. Within just a few years of its beginning, the *Apostolic Faith* Mission had become predominantly black with Seymour remaining as pastor. Years later prejudice surfaced there as well, however, when Seymour himself excluded whites from leadership posts at the mission, reserving those for people of color.

### **Seymour's Legacy**

On a worldwide scale, the Azusa Street revival contributed to a new diaspora of missionaries who anticipated that global evangelization would be achieved by gospel preaching accompanied by

miraculous signs and wonders (Acts 5:12). While only a small number of missionaries traveled from Azusa Street to minister overseas, it impacted many more who started other Pentecostal revival centers that surfaced as a result of hearing the news of the outpouring of the Spirit in Los Angeles. For many, the Azusa Street revival had inaugurated at long last the great end-times revival.

Much more could be said about the long-term influence of the revival and that of "Bishop" William J. Seymour (an honorary title that he later received, probably from his congregation). The limitations of this article, however, preclude such a lengthy discussion. We will look specifically at the legacy of Seymour.

To begin with, it must be noted that he modeled a genuine humility that many acclaimed. He desired to foster unity among the seekers of the Holy Spirit at Azusa and encouraged them to be sensitive to the Spirit's direction of the services there. Photographs depict him as a warm, friendly, and smiling person of average physical stature. Seymour's bout with smallpox had left him blind in his left eye.

Nevertheless, Seymour's ministry did not come without a price. He personally endured the biting criticisms of his opponents—holiness leaders not sympathetic to Pentecostalism, as well as the contempt of Parham and later that of Frank Bartleman. As white Pentecostal denominations formed and told their stories, Seymour was forgotten, partly because he did not contribute to their founding, partly due to their seeing Topeka as the fountainhead of the Movement, and partly due to prioritizing evangelism above preserving the historical record. Seymour also departed from the teaching that speaking in tongues was the initial physical evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. These all contributed to Seymour becoming an almost-forgotten figure in Pentecostal history.

Seymour's greatness today can be found in his concern for spiritual empowerment and unity. The attention at Topeka and other Pentecostal revivals centered on the need for Christians to receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit to win souls to Christ. The unique interracial and intercultural dynamics at Azusa, however, accented both holiness of character and power to witness in an unusual demonstration of love and equality in the body of Christ. In this respect, it powerfully reminds us that the fullness of Pentecostal power will elude those who seek for power in their ministry above that of Christlike character.

The missionary expansion of the Early Church as recorded in the Book of Acts highlights the fact the Pentecostal outpouring led to the embrace of people who were normally considered impure by Jewish standards. The outpourings of the Spirit at Samaria (Acts 8) and among the Gentiles (Acts 10) taught early Christians that God's redemptive work transcends racial and cultural lines. Fallen humanity always accords such differences more important than what God designed and by so doing tyrannizes His creative handiwork. Because they had now been "baptized into Christ" and "put on Christ," Paul alerted the Galatian Christians, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

On the Day of Pentecost, Jewish visitors from many countries stood bewildered as they heard the praises of God in their native languages (Acts 2:5–13). Some seriously asked, "What does this mean?" Others poked fun and failed to consider the significance of the occasion. Nonetheless, Peter, placing things in divine perspective, referred them to the words of Joel: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people" (Acts 2:17, NIV).

In September 1906, the first issue of the *Apostolic Faith* reported: "In a short time God began to manifest His power and soon the building could not contain the people. Proud, well-dressed preachers come in to 'investigate.' Soon their high looks are replaced with wonder, then conviction comes, and very often you will find them in a short time wallowing on the dirty floor, asking God to forgive them and make them as little children."

The Azusa Street revival illustrated the fundamental truth about the acquisition of spiritual power: The desire to love others and win the world for Christ begins with brokenness, repentance, and humility.

### **Endnotes**

1. Frank Bartleman, *Azusa Street* (South Plainfield, N.J.: Bridge Publishing, 1980), xviii.
2. Ansel Post, *Way of Faith*, quoted in Frank Bartleman, *Azusa Street*, (South Plainfield, N.J.: Bridge Publishing, 1980), 61.
3. Bartleman, 58.
4. Frank Bartleman, *Azusa Street* (South Plainfield, N.J.: Bridge Publishing, 1980), xviii.
5. Ansel Post, *Way of Faith*, quoted in Frank Bartleman, *Azusa Street*, (South Plainfield, N.J.: Bridge Publishing, 1980), 61.
6. Bartleman, 58.
7. Stanley H. Frodsham, *With Signs Following* (Springfield, Mo.: Gospel Publishing House, 1941), 34.
8. Bartleman, xviii.