Revisiting Azusa Street: A Centennial Retrospect

Edith L. Blumhofer

In April 2006 North American Pentecostals mark the centenary of an event that stands at the core of their myth of origins. It happened in Los Angeles and takes its name from its location—Azusa Street, an unremarkable thoroughfare that became a byword to thousands of devout women and men who mingled with the merely curious between 1906 and 1908 at a modest building known as the Azusa Street Mission. There from mid-April 1906 through at least 1908, revival meetings ran almost continuously. Along with traditional revival rhetoric about sin and salvation, visitors heard exhortations to pursue heart purity and spiritual power. But more compelling than the rhetoric or the hearty singing and agonized prayers that filled the hours were the gifts of the Holy Spirit in action.

At Azusa Street one could see and hear the “utterance gifts” listed in 1 Corinthians 12:8–10: tongues, interpretations of tongues, prophecies, and words of knowledge and wisdom. Seekers travelled in prayer for the baptism with the Holy Spirit, an experience they expected would be attested by speaking in tongues. Since they were told it “came only on the sanctified life,” confession of sin and inner conviction of forgiveness also had a prominent place. People who had “broken through” to Spirit baptism interpreted tongues and prophesied; the sick came for healing; the curious and scoffers came, too, drawn by newspaper cartoons or word-of-mouth, or perhaps by the bedlam. Startling claims became commonplace among the faithful: from visions to the ability to converse readily in unknown foreign languages, participants in the Azusa Street revival dealt daily in the miraculous. They concluded that they held center stage in God’s plan for the last days; events at the Azusa Street Mission were nothing less than a “new Pentecost”—a long-awaited “restoration of the faith once delivered to the saints” that would issue in an unprecedented burst of evangelicalism before the end of time. Their name, Apostolic Faith Movement, captured their conviction that they stood in continuity with New Testament Christian experience; the label “Pentecostal” came a little later and pointed to the centrality of the first Christian Pentecost in their self-understanding.

Now, a century later, no one knows how many Pentecostal Christians there are. In the United States, Pentecostal denominations boast over 10 million members. If one adds the persons in other Christian churches who embrace Pentecostal-like beliefs and practices, the number more than doubles. 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. Such numbers are notoriously difficult to verify, but by any measure Pentecostal Christianity has experienced notable dramatic growth. Was the Azusa Street revival the source of the charismatic flavor of much of contemporary world Christianity? Is the story line simple and one-dimensional—from Azusa Street to the world? Or was Azusa Street one of multiple sources of contemporary Pentecostalism? Is Azusa Street primarily a North American story? The Azusa Street centennial offers a fitting occasion to explore the import of a 1906 revival that has assumed a larger-than-life place in the collective memory of North American Pentecostals.

Setting and Meaning

Today the site of the Azusa Street Mission stands in the Los Angeles area known as Little Tokyo. The building is long gone, but in 1906 a deserted African Methodist Episcopal Church on Azusa Street seemed an ideal site for undisturbed protracted meetings that had been overflowing a small house in a residential neighborhood on Bonnie Brae Street. There for several weeks in early April 1906, blacks and whites had mingled to pray for the baptism with the Holy Spirit. Their leader was William J. Seymour, a black preacher recently arrived in the city with a new twist on revival preaching. Seymour’s message summarized that of his mentor, Charles Parham, a Midwestern healing evangelist who had concluded that the biblical evidence of the baptism with the Holy Spirit was speaking in tongues. Parham communicated his own eagerness for the restoration of apostolic experience to his adherents, and Seymour carried the word to Los Angeles. In the tumultuous world of American radical evangelism in Los Angeles, as elsewhere, competing claims about spiritual power fueled intense debate. Seymour offered verifiable “Bible evidence” for his views and set his message of an encounter with the Holy Spirit in the context of an end-times restoration of the apostolic faith. The mix had appeal among those who yearned for revival—or, as they put it, wanted “more of God.”

Before long, the Azusa Street Mission could not hold the crowds. “Los Angeles seems to be the place, and this the time, in the mind of God,” wrote one devotee, “for the restoration of the church to her former place, favor and power. The fullness of time seems to have come for the church’s complete restoration.” This was restoration with a purpose: first, it was emphatically an end-times event; second, it was intended to fuel unprecedented and swift world evangelization.

The faithful expected that tongues speech would issue in the

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practical ability to speak languages useful for missionary work. Reports proliferated of tongues-enabled impromptu conversations with immigrants. For example, a young southern Californian named Lillian Keyes professed the ability to converse with local Chinese immigrants in two distinct dialects. The most devout assigned such experiences life-altering significance. In October 1906 the Azusa Street Mission’s publication recorded the testimony of a young female bound for Africa on the strength of her conviction that she had been given “the language of Africa.” The same enthusiasm that Lillian Garr (who had been impressed at Azusa Street that she had a call to China, while her husband professed one to India) improved daily in her miraculously given Thibetan and Chinese. When Lucy Farrow, an African American woman, felt called to Liberia, she reported miraculous ability to preach in Kru. Either external advice or internal conviction about what language one had been “given,” then, prompted men and women to sail for remote places with little thought for mundane matters like financial support, firm destination, or suitable supplies. “God is solving the missionary problem,” an unsigned column in the Apostolic Faith editorialized late in 1906, “sending out new-tongued missionaries on the apostolic faith line.” “The gift of languages is given with the commission, ‘Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature,’” another column proclaimed. “The Lord has given languages to the unlearned, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, French, German, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, Zulu and languages of Africa, Hindu and Bengali and dialects of India, Chippewa and other languages of the Indians, Esquimaux, the deaf mute language, and, in fact, the Holy Ghost speaks all the languages of the world through his children.”

The expectation of miraculous speech in known languages soon faded: so-called missionary tongues, by most accounts, simply failed to deliver the expected language facility. Yet the anticipation of xenolalia suggests the aspiration of preaching the Gospel directly to every language and culture, their proclamation unencumbered by any traces of Western cultural baggage, even language or accent. They did not articulate this aspiration; to their minds, the primary advantage of xenolalia was speedy evangelism.

In place of xenolalia, participants in the “new Pentecost” came to focus on a phrase from Acts 1:8: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” The baptism with the Holy Spirit was “enduement with power for service.” If it did not deliver a tangible result like immediate linguistic fluency, it did testify to possession of the divine power necessary for effective Christian witness anywhere. Participants considered that Azusa Street had cosmic meaning as a sign that the end of time had come. Its personal meaning revolved around themes of power, purity, and spiritual gifts. The baptism with the Holy Spirit transformed the meaning of life by heightening sensitivity to the spiritual world. Like Charles Wesley before them, early Pentecostals thought their religious experience brought a touch of heaven into their ordinary lives: “I have found a heaven below, living in the glory of the Lord,” one of their choruses ran. The lines of another professed, “The Spirit has come, has come to abide! I’ve Pentecost in my soul.”

**Dissemination**

The Azusa Street Mission was at first the hub of a local revival, but soon people came from afar to visit. “We hardly know people’s names in this movement,” the Apostolic Faith editor regretted. The emphasis on evangelism in the end times encouraged those who professed the baptism with the Holy Spirit to move on and get busy. Affordable rail fares gave them access to all parts of the country. Those intent on destinations to the east often evangelized their way across the country before embarking from the port of New York, urging any along the way who would listen to embrace the “full gospel” of the restored apostolic faith. Some Pentecostals went abroad on short-term missions, others to stay. References to the imminence of Christ’s return punctuated the revival’s rhetoric and fueled enthusiasm for evangelism. Some moved restlessly from one country to another, pressing especially on missionaries the claims of their new spiritual convictions. Results were mixed at best, and complaints trickled back that Pentecostals seemed more anxious to pray than to work, more eager to persuade missionaries than to commit to the task of evangelizing native populations. The first Pentecostal missionaries were no one’s responsibility, and frustrated local officials had to decide how to deal with religious enthusiasts who lacked any pledged support. The resulting confusion was one reason some Pentecostals banded together to create structures for ongoing responsible missionary endeavors.

**Azusa Street Mission**

For their part, the Pentecostals whose accounts survive projected confidence in their calling and optimism about the ultimate triumph of their “full gospel.” Until it ceased publication in Los Angeles in 1908, the monthly paper of the Azusa Street Mission followed their activities and played an important role in keeping them informed about each other. The paper gave individual Pentecostals a sense of participation in a revival spreading from North America around the world. Together with the people who passed through the mission and testified to the revival, the Apostolic Faith was the primary popularizer of the mission’s message. It surfaced networks of people here and there who had experienced similar things before or beyond the immediate influence of Azusa Street. It circulated especially among widely scattered people and ministries who were already densely networked.

Radical evangelicals issued an astonishing number of simi-
lar papers. Often published with funds “as the Lord provided,” some circulated widely to overlapping constituencies and kept interested people aware of current news, personalities, and teaching. Excerpts from the Apostolic Faith disseminated the Azusa Street message in other constituencies, while copies of the Apostolic Faith circled the globe and captured the imaginations of people here and there. Some readers wrote to the mission; some recognized similarities between Azusa Street and local revivals in their own contexts. Revivals elsewhere prodded readers of such papers to pray for more intense revival where they were. Azusa Street was part of a larger context of renewal—most self-consciously that of the Welsh revival—and such events prompted people outside the context to pray for revival, while local revivals nurtured openness to reports of divine blessing elsewhere.

Even in North America the Azusa Street Mission was not the single source of the Pentecostal movement. Toronto had its own network of radical evangelicals who inclined toward the same spirituality before they heard about the Azusa Street revival. In the Chicago area, hub of John Alexander Dowie’s Christian Catholic Apostolic Church and home to many Scandinavian pietist immigrants, other impulses pushed radical evangelicals in a similar direction. Scandinavian pietists in Minnesota experienced intense revival accompanied by tongues speaking long before they knew anything about Azusa Street. It is possible to overstate the actual—though not the mythical—importance of Azusa Street for North American Pentecostalism.

It is also possible to overstate the racial inclusivity of Azusa Street. Much has been made of a sentence in an influential book by the peripatetic Azusa Street participant Frank Bartleman. In 1925 he exulted that at “Old Azusa” “the color line” had been “washed away in the blood.” But that washing apparently did not last long. Tensions between African-Americans and Latinos, as well as among blacks and whites, led to friction and schism at the mission. Bartleman reported a meeting in which “poor illiterate Mexicans” attempted to speak, only to be “crushed . . . ruthlessly” by the leader. Azusa Street’s moment of racial inclusivity was brief and uneasy at best, though people of many nationalities passed through and mingled for longer and shorter periods at the height of the revival.

Bartleman played a vital role in creating Azusa Street as a literary event. In 1925 he published privately What Really Happened at Azusa Street, a small paperback he tirelessly peddled. It ran through several printings and surprisingly had no competitor as the authoritative account of the meetings. Bartleman described, interpreted, and crafted the event through his own lens, and the result may say as much about him as about Azusa Street. He rhapsodized over the first few months at “Old Azusa” but criticized its direction after the first few months as a betrayal of “real Pentecost.” More than any other person, Frank Bartleman is responsible for placing Azusa Street at the heart of the story of modern Pentecostal origins and interpreting its meaning. Thanks in large part to him, Azusa Street sometimes looms larger than the sum of its parts.

So What?

How does all of this matter to world Christianity today? The answer is not so straightforward as one might assume. The usual American rendering of the story uses Azusa Street as a symbol for the beginning of a Pentecostal movement that spread from North America to the world either directly or indirectly by inspiring missionaries abroad already inclined to such piety to identify with the fledgling Pentecostal movement. Through this lens, Azusa Street has two primary implications for Christianity worldwide. First, over time, North American and British Pentecostals formed denominations that reigned in and organized the missionary emphasis apparent at Azusa Street and elsewhere. Western Pentecostal denominations quickly developed missionary programs that straddled the globe. The number of Pentecostal missionaries was not large, though it grew steadily. So, at one level, if Azusa Street unleashed an impulse that led to the founding of the Church of God, Cleveland, or the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, or the Assemblies of God, or the Church of the Foursquare Gospel, or the Assemblies of God, or the Church of God in Christ, then Azusa Street is an entry point to the story of what their missionary endeavors have accomplished abroad. And though Pentecostal denominations have standardized or repackaged parts of Azusa Street’s message, their consistent emphasis on the imminence of the end, the certainty of an eternal hell, and the relevance of the supernatural to daily life links them to the Azusa Mission’s core message.

A second implication for Christianity worldwide is that reports from Azusa Street inspired some missionaries and nationals to reconceptualize their spirituality by giving prominence to the supernatural in the mundane activities of life. A sense of divine immediacy, guidance, and intervention had implications for doing mission and soon brought backlash from mission organizations. Among missionaries already abroad when they heard of this revival, Azusa Street was divisive but also constructive.

But beyond its role in demonstrating to Western Pentecostal satisfaction that God called the Pentecostal movement into being, Azusa Street is important to the larger story of contemporary world Christianity as one of a series of revivals at the dawn of the twentieth century that emphasized the Holy Spirit and inclined people in widely scattered local settings to pursue a more intense Spirit-driven piety. In some parts of the world, one can trace such impulses back and see them flowering especially in the nineteenth century, but even a narrow focus on the years around Azusa Street reveals a surge of interest in the work of the Holy Spirit. As the century dawned, American evangelist R. A. Torrey secured signatures from some of the nation’s most prominent clergy to a covenant to pray for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Azusa Street in 1906 followed, among others, revivals in Korea in 1903, in Wales in 1904 and 1905, and in India in 1905. Korea and India saw revival again in 1907, and Manchuria soon after. The view that speaking in tongues always manifested Spirit baptism set Azusa Street apart from these other revivals, some of which also included tongues speech and various spiritual gifts. All of them featured confession of sin and summoned Christians to purity of heart and life. And so Azusa Street was one of a series of scattered contemporary renewals with implications for popular Christian spirituality.

Despite their hyperbolic rhetoric in 1906 and later, Azusa Street participants did not immediately change Christian practice in the West or abroad. Rather, they found their own niche. Their hopes to promote Christian unity under a restorationist banner faded quickly as within months their internal unity ruptured. At the end of 1906 a Los Angeles pastor noted, “In the

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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.”

For the most part, for fifty years Pentecostals everywhere existed outside the purview of religion pundits. In the 1950s ecumenical activist Henry Pitney van Dusen, president of Union Theological Seminary in New York, was surprised to discover the vitality of Pentecostals in South America. His best-known observations came in an article he wrote in June 1958 for Life Magazine proposing that there might be a “third force” in Christendom, including Pentecostals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Adventists, and Mormons—all groups that one might conveniently discount in North America but who could not as easily be overlooked elsewhere. A decade later, Brown University historian William G. McLoughlin demurred: Pentecostals did not constitute a new dynamic force, he argued. To the contrary, at least in North America, Pentecostals, like other reactionary groups, would eventually disappear. Clearly, at least in the West in the 1960s, heirs of Azusa Street had not accomplished anything that demanded consideration among established religious or academic authorities. But McLoughlin’s death knell was premature. Even as he wrote, the charismatic movement was attracting notice, disseminating Pentecostal practices in a wide swath of Christian constituencies; a new generation of affluent Western Pentecostal entrepreneurs took to the global airwaves; and in the West a growing acknowledgment of the influence of evangelical Protestants focused attention on Pentecostals, too.

This second wave of Pentecostal fervor—unlike the first planting of Pentecostal institutions around the globe—has little to do with Azusa Street. And it often features aspects of Pentecostalism that Western Pentecostal denominations tried for decades to marginalize. Signs and wonders, exorcisms, prophecies, a prosperity gospel, and other forthrightly supernaturalist emphases combine with expressive worship to energize Christian practice around the world. Pentecostalism spreads without benefit of institutions, and its non-Western forms often articulate new social and political, as well as spiritual, agendas. New technologies, ease of travel, recent immigration, and the breakdown of denominational loyalty in the West have given new appeal to these forms of Pentecostalism in the West as well.

While North American Pentecostal denominations have often domesticated Azusa Street and narrowed its message by equating Pentecostal experience with the baptism with the Holy Spirit evidenced uniformly and immediately by speaking in tongues, outside the West, tongues speech may play a different role—perhaps as one of many spiritual gifts rather than as a single evidence of a particular experience. Non-Western Pentecostals or charismatics may or may not take one of these names, but the labels often encompass those who accent the supernatural, enter the vivid world of spiritual warfare, exorcise demons, and encounter the divine in dreams, visions, words of wisdom, prophecies, tongues, and interpretation of tongues. To be sure, some of this recent expression of Pentecostal fervor is tied to the churches, schools, and media affiliated with Pentecostal denominations, agencies, and ministries in the West. But even then, one must nuance the picture by close scrutiny of local situations. For example, sometimes indigenous people experienced revival and invited Pentecostal missionaries to resource it.

If Azusa Street has indirect meaning for those around the world whose Pentecostal belief and practice were mediated directly through Western missionaries, it does not loom large in the collective memories of the vast majority of Pentecostals worldwide, for whom, if it has resonance at all, it is but one example of the many ways in which the Holy Spirit revives the church. Azusa Street was a Western event that played itself out primarily in Western Pentecostalism, though it had a prominent role in encouraging evangelization, energizing religious imaginations, and networking scattered enthusiasts. And its early hopes for “missionary tongues” suggest to modern scholars a passion for communicating the Gospel unimpeded by cultural barriers. But an overemphasis on Azusa Street gives a Western point of reference for a surge of modern Pentecostal growth that may be better understood by nuancing its local contexts. Azusa Street has a place in the story of how contemporary Christianity came to be, but its story is but one piece in the narrative of exploding charismatic Christianity, not its prototype.

Outside the West, those who embrace Pentecostal forms of spirituality have their own reference points for their stories. Those that begin in contact with Western Pentecostal missionaries often move rapidly to adaptation and put down local roots as people read, receive, and interpret the Gospel for themselves. Philip Jenkins’s article in this issue, “Reading the Bible in the Global South,” makes the point that Christians outside the West encounter the biblical text with an immediacy that may incline readers to Pentecostal or charismatic understandings of miraculous provision, healings, exorcisms, and spiritual warfare. David Martin’s pathbreaking Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish makes much of Pentecostalism’s ability to move readily across cultures and sees Pentecostalism as a manifestation of modernity and the religious mobilization of the culturally despised; his index, though, does not list Azusa Street. Using an African lens, Ogbu Kalu argues persuasively that Azusa Street must be contextualized if a truly global Pentecostal history is to be written.

In his award-winning Missionary Movement in Christian History, Andrew Walls noted that American Christianity developed as it did in “a specifically local form.” It follows, then, that when Christian faith takes root anywhere in the world, local forms emerge. That observation applies as well to Azusa Street. The event was shaped by its particular American context. The way participants read the Bible led them to understand themselves as part of a revival with universal rather than merely local import. Christian revivals anywhere often inspire longing for spiritual renewal and energy for evangelistic work. Azusa Street certainly did, but so did other contemporary revivals that ebbed and flowed, creating other contexts that nurtured similar religious beliefs and practices. Early in the twentieth century, Western influence around the globe made it logical for Western Pentecostals to make bold claims about the global meaning of Azusa Street. Its global meaning faded—or at least altered—from the 1960s on as independence movements changed the global map and indigenous Christianities grounded new visions of the future.

Azusa Street as presented in its publication Apostolic Faith offers instructive insights into the tumult of ideas and practices that birthed Pentecostalism in the West and sent its emissaries around the globe. Together with other local stories, it is a piece of the puzzle that is contemporary world Pentecostalism.
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—Master of Theology student Melvin Sayer came to Trinity with his family after nine years of ministry in Ukraine.

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Notes


4. Bartleman, How Pentecost Came to Los Angeles, p. 89.


11. Ibid., p. 4.


17. Bartleman, How Pentecost Came to Los Angeles, pp. 68ff.


