

FIRE from HEAVEN

**The Rise of Pentecostal
Spirituality and the
Reshaping of Religion in
the Twenty-first Century**

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P R E F A C E

A FEW YEARS AGO the editor of a national magazine called to ask if I wanted to make a comment for an article they were preparing on the anniversary of *Time* magazine's famous "Is God Dead?" cover story. He told me that he and his colleagues were puzzled. Why did Presbyterians, Methodists, and Episcopalians seem to be losing members—down 20 to 40 percent in the twenty-five years since that cover hit the stands—while certain other churches, mainly pentecostal ones, had doubled or tripled their memberships in the same period. He had also seen reports that pentecostalism was growing very quickly in Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia. Was there something ominous, he wanted to know, about all this? And furthermore what did I think of the rumor that President Bill Clinton used to play his saxophone at pentecostal revival services in Redfield, Arkansas? He sounded a little worried.

I thought I knew why he was calling me. Nearly three decades ago I wrote a book, *The Secular City*, in which I tried to work out a theology for the "postreligious" age that many sociologists had confidently assured us was coming. Since then, however, religion—or at least some religions—seems to have gained a new lease on life. Today it is secularity, not spirituality, that may be headed for extinction. I thought, perhaps the editor wanted me to eat a little crow in public. Instead I thanked him for the call and told him I was probably not the right person to ask. But his questions were thought-provoking. I had read some of the same amazing statistics, including the estimate that pentecostal churches are growing at the rate of 20 million new members a year and that their worldwide membership had now reached some 410 million. I had wondered myself why they have such an appeal, but the phone call pushed me into a more active inquiry. I decided to find out what I could about pentecostals, not just by reading about them but by visiting their churches wherever I could and by talking with both

their ministers and with ordinary members. My project eventually took me to four different continents, to a score of conferences and conventions of pentecostal leaders, and to more congregations than I can enumerate.

Even before I started my journey through the world of pentecostalism it had become obvious that instead of the "death of God" some theologians pronounced not many years ago, or the waning of religion that sociologists had extrapolated, something quite different has taken place. Perhaps I was too young and impressionable when the scholars made those sobering projections. In any case I had swallowed them all too easily and had tried to think about what their theological consequences might be. But it had now become clear that the predictions themselves had been wrong. The prognosticators had written that the technological pace and urban bustle of the twentieth century would increasingly shove religion to the margin where, deprived of roots, it would shrivel. They allowed that faith might well survive as a valued heirloom, perhaps in ethnic enclaves or family customs, but insisted that religion's days as a shaper of culture and history were over.

This did not happen. Instead, before the academic forecasters could even begin to draw their pensions, a religious renaissance of sorts is under way all over the globe. Religions that some theologians thought had been stunted by western materialism or suffocated by totalitarian repression have regained a whole new vigor. Buddhism and Hinduism, Christianity and Judaism, Islam and Shinto, and many smaller sects are once again alive and well. For many people, however, it is not always good news that religions that were once thought to be safely moribund or at most peripheral have again become controversial players on the world stage. We may or may not be entering a new "age of the Spirit" as some more sanguine observers hope. But we are definitely in a period of renewed religious vitality, another "great awakening" if you will, with all the promise and peril religious revivals always bring with them, but this time on a world scale. But why were the predictors so wrong? Why has this unanticipated resurgence of religion occurred?

As I began work on this book I was aware that pentecostalism is only one particularly dramatic example of this wider religious revival, of what the French writer Gilles Kepel calls "the revenge of God." Still, I gradually became convinced that if I could somehow decipher pentecostalism's inner meaning and discern the source of its enormous appeal, this would provide an essential clue to understanding the larger religious upsurge of which it is a part. So, it became important for me to try to fathom exactly what pentecostalism is and what about it is so attractive to such a wide variety of people around the world.

It was not clear to me at first that I was up to the task. I am not myself a pentecostal, and I wondered if those inside the movement might view me with suspicion. I would need to explore where pentecostalism came from to appreciate the contours of its development. But I had never learned anything about the movement either in seminary or in graduate school. Perhaps my teachers felt it was not worth mentioning. However, as I started on my project I quickly discovered that I took to it with remarkable ease. First, I rarely had any trouble getting pentecostals to tell me about their faith. They talk about it at the slightest provocation. If there was a problem sometimes it was how I could delicately end the conversation. Also I never once felt any snubbing or suspicion. Wherever I went pentecostal people welcomed me to their churches and invariably invited me to come back. Part of what made my work so easy and enjoyable is that pentecostals tend to be very happy about their faith and they want you to share that happiness. It also turned out, however, that a peculiar combination of family ancestry and personal history had provided me with the right mixture of empathy and curiosity, of critical appreciation and sympathetic distance, which is needed in order to understand this complex and fascinating spiritual child of our time.

It is my hope that this book will help people who have heard about the pentecostal movement and may be curious about it to learn something from one who is neither an insider bent on painting the most attractive picture nor an outsider determined to write an exposé. I hope that the pentecostals who read it will recognize themselves, and will find that I have been accurate in my

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portrayal, generous in my commendations, and fair in my criticisms. I also hope that other thoughtful people who wonder what shape religion will take in the coming century will appreciate my speculations on that question as well as my intuition that a careful consideration of the pentecostal movement yields some valuable hints to its answer.

The Fire Falls in Los Angeles

*And in the last days it shall be,
God declares,
That I will pour out my Spirit upon
all flesh.*

Acts of the Apostles 2:17–19

*Pentecost has come to Los Angeles, the
American Jerusalem. Every sect, creed and
doctrine under heaven . . . as well as every
nation is represented.*

Frank Bartleman, 1906

The fire from heaven descended on April 9, 1906, on a small band of black domestic servants and custodial employees gathered for prayer in a wooden bungalow at 214 North Bonnie Brae Avenue in Los Angeles, California. Their leader, a self-educated traveling preacher named William Joseph Seymour, had been assuring them for weeks that if they prayed with sufficient earnestness, God was ready to send a new Pentecost. Like the miraculous event described in the Acts of the Apostles, this latter-day outpouring of the Spirit would be demonstrated with tongues of flame, healing, speaking in strange tongues, and other signs and wonders. Many scoffed and doubted. Because of his controversial teaching, Seymour—from Louisiana by way of Houston—had been locked out of one church by an irate pastor and denied access to others. But he and his tiny

company continued to meet in kitchens and parlors, praying that God would renew and purify a Christianity they believed was crippled by empty rituals, dried-up creeds, and the sin of racial bigotry.

When the fire finally did fall, shouts of joy and rapturous dancing before the Spirit resounded throughout the neighborhood. The word got out. Night after night people crowded into the little house, stood on the porch, and stopped in the street to listen and catch a glimpse. White people began to come, and Mexicans. Soon the crowds grew too large, so Seymour and his friends rented a small abandoned church on nearby Azusa Street which had recently done service as a warehouse and then as a livery stable. They swept it out and moved their daily meetings there on April 14, 1906. It was no White City, but from that nondescript storehouse where on a rainy day one could still detect the scent of horses, a spiritual fire roared forth that was to race around the world and touch hundreds of millions of people with its warmth and power.

The Azusa Street revival itself continued day after day, month after month for three years. Like the religious dignitaries who had gathered at Chicago a decade earlier, the janitors and washerwomen who huddled in the converted stable in Los Angeles also believed that they stood on the edge of a new era. They also believed God was distressed with the disunity and confusion that plagued their religion. Like many of the speakers at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, they sensed that what was happening among them was like a new Pentecost, a mighty gathering together of the tribes and nations that had been scattered and confounded at the foot of the ill-fated Tower of Babel. They saw signs and omens of this new dispensation everywhere. But they also sensed something the notables at Chicago had missed: that when the flames came, they would purge and purify as well as enliven and inspire. The proud would be brought low and the humble exalted. There would be sulphur as well as balm. It would be the fearful as well as the wonderful day of the Lord.

Of course none of the people who met at Azusa Street had been to the Parliament of Religions. They were not the right color and they came from the wrong side of the tracks. Even when white people began to crowd into the Azusa Street revival, they were mainly unlettered,

unrefined, and, as often as not, unemployed as well. Even when the fire fell, and when the embers began to waft across the country, and then across the seas, the scoffers continued to scorn. These "holy rollers" were either demented or demonic, or they were comical or scandalous, or they were all of these at once. What kind of buffoonish God would entrust a revival of religion to such people? But despite ridicule and opposition, the conflagration continued to expand as the sparks blew from ghetto to slum to rural hamlet, to St. Louis and New York, and then across the oceans to Europe and Asia, Africa and South America. As the world approached the cusp of a new millennium, the fire was still spreading.

THE FIRST PENTECOST happened in Jerusalem somewhere around A.D. 34. According to the biblical account, the same Spirit of God that was present in Jesus had descended again to empower his followers to continue his work. The Spirit's coming was marked with tongues of fire and the creation of a new community that brought together previously divided languages and nations. But, pentecostals believe, after this original fire from heaven, something went wrong. Instead of announcing the glad news to all the nations, Christians became smug and indolent. They lapsed into writing meticulous creeds and inventing lifeless rituals. Centuries passed, and Christianity degenerated, but God did not give up. Here and there He sent a sprinkle of blessings, but promised that just before the climax of history He would pour them down in the torrents of a "latter rain," foreseen by the prophet Joel, which would surpass even the first Pentecost in its potency. There would be a worldwide resurgence of faith, and the healings and miracles that had been so evident in the first years of Christianity would happen again as a prelude to the second coming of Jesus Christ, this time to establish his visible kingdom.

During the final decades of the nineteenth century the conviction grew among many American Christians that this long-awaited new outpouring of the Spirit might soon occur. Here and there healings and instances of tongue speaking were reported.

Church newspapers and conferences began to speak more and more about "another Pentecost" and to urge people to pray earnestly for its coming. Then in April 1906, at least as pentecostals rehearse their story, at a tiny black mission in Los Angeles, a series of events took place that convinced at first hundreds, then thousands of people that the latter rain had started to fall and the revival they had been praying for had indeed begun. Those who embraced this thrilling message became convinced that it was no longer a matter of praying *for* a revival; they *were* the revival, living evidence that what everyone had been waiting for had now commenced. They went forth to tell the world, and the modern pentecostal movement was born.

The epic of how the pentecostal crusade, despite stinging condemnation from the established churches and rancorous internal bickering, continued to grow until it encircled the globe includes many players. But it is impossible to understand pentecostalism's origins without reference to the story of one particular man. William Joseph Seymour, a black preacher born in 1870 of parents who were former slaves in Centreville, Louisiana, had an inclination to the "Holiness" teachings about the indwelling Christ that were then sweeping the south. With no formal education, he had taught himself to read. But nothing in Seymour's early life would make him the natural choice of a Hollywood casting office for the role of a social visionary who would eventually introduce into the American consciousness a vision of the New Jerusalem that was so radically different from the one that had flourished for a summer, and then gone up in smoke, on the shores of Lake Michigan.

From the outset Seymour was restless, a man on the move. In his twenties he left Louisiana for Indianapolis where he worked as a waiter in a fancy hotel and attended the local Methodist Episcopal Church. Why he joined this particular church, a black congregation in a predominantly white denomination, is a matter of some speculation. It was not the closest one to his residence. Did he join because it was more sympathetic to newly circulating Holiness ideas or, as one biographer believes, because he was already looking for the more interracial kind of Christian movement his preaching would soon help to create?

By the time he was thirty, Seymour had moved on to Cincinnati. Somewhere along the line he had been "saved and sanctified" by a revivalist group called the Evening Light Saints. These believers taught that human history was approaching its dusk and that Christ would appear soon to set up his Kingdom, but that before the final denouement, God would shower fresh gifts of the Spirit on the faithful. Just as a "latter rain" would fall on the spiritually parched earth, so also a bright light would illuminate the gathering darkness. Meanwhile, however, true Christians should leave the existing denominations—both black and white—in order to become a part of the purified and racially inclusive church God was even then raising.

Seymour soon moved from Cincinnati to Houston, where he attended a black church in which he witnessed something he had never encountered before. He heard a woman pray aloud in a language, or in what seemed to be a language, that no one there could understand. Seymour was touched to the core. As a man of prayer himself, he could sense that this woman had somehow attained a depth of spiritual intensity he had long sought but never found. But he was also excited because in the popular Holiness theology of the day such "speaking in tongues" was held to be a sure sign of the imminent coming of the Last Days and the descent of the heavenly city foreseen in Revelation.

These experiences changed Seymour's life. After the meeting he asked Lucy Farrow, the woman who had spoken in the strange tongue, more about her remarkable gift. In response she introduced him to one Charles Fox Parham, a white preacher who ran a Holiness school in the same city, and for whom she had once worked as a governess in Topeka, Kansas. Eagerly, Seymour sought out Parham and begged to be admitted to the school. Parham hesitated. A Ku Klux Klan sympathizer, he did not feel ready to welcome this obviously earnest, but just as obviously black, seeker. On the other hand, to turn him away completely would seem uncharitable. So Parham compromised. He told Seymour he could listen to the lectures seated on a chair outside an open window. On rainy days he was permitted to sit inside the building, but in the hallway outside the classroom, with the door left ajar.

Seymour was not discouraged. He listened through the window and prayed ardently for the new baptism of the Spirit and the gift of tongues. But strive as he would for his own "personal pentecost," the experience somehow eluded him. Nevertheless Seymour continued to preach and testify at black missions in Houston where he eventually met a woman named Neely Terry. She told Seymour that in her home church in Los Angeles, a black Baptist congregation, a certain Sister Hutchins had recently preached at a revival and had sounded much like him. The trouble was that the deacons of that church had not approved of her urging a second "baptism of the Spirit" (as Seymour and all the Holiness preachers did), and had ushered her out along with the church members who had responded to her message. Undaunted, Sister Hutchins had rented a storefront on Santa Fe Avenue near the railroad tracks and carried on. When Neely Terry returned to Los Angeles a short while later she told Sister Hutchins about Seymour's unusual talent as a preacher, and the sister (her full name was Julia W. Hutchins) sent him an urgent invitation to come west and assist her in her labors. To Seymour, her call reminded him of the vision that had once appeared to St. Paul when a man called to him and said, "Come to Macedonia and help us." So Seymour prayed about it, then decided the Lord wanted him to go. Borrowing the train fare from Parham he set off for his own Macedonia, eager to preach the good news of the gift of tongues and the imminent coming of the glorious New Jerusalem.

Early twentieth-century Los Angeles was to prove a fertile field for the seeds Seymour would sow. It was there that the grains would take root, the plant would flourish, and the spores would blow to distant lands. This was not exactly what the city's founder had envisioned. Father Juan Crespi, the Spanish priest who, along with the explorer Gaspar de Portola, reached an Indian village in southern California in 1769, and renamed it "Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles," was a faithful servant of his church. But he was not a prophet. He can be excused for not foreseeing that the settlement he founded there would one day become a testing ground where the following centuries' visions—both religious and

secular ones—would wrestle with each other; a scaled-down preview of what would take place all over the world.

At first, destiny's choice of Los Angeles as the set for this mythic battle might appear to be an attempt at cosmic humor. In retrospect, however, it is clear that there were always good reasons why this city was a likely candidate. When the first permanent settlers arrived from Mexico in 1781, twelve families of forty-six persons in all, they included people of mestizo, black, and Spanish ancestry. The city's cosmopolitan coloration was there from the first day. But it was still some decades before its conquest by the United States in 1846, the discovery of gold in 1848, and the coming of the railroads in 1869 endowed Los Angeles with the zany excess we associate with it today. It quickly became an arena of clashing dreams and rival eschatologies, where utopian socialists, real estate hawkers, script writers, and revivalists hustled the same crowds. Hollywood, Forest Lawn, Angelus Temple, and Disneyland all seemed singularly appropriate additions to the overall blend.

In addition, Los Angeles has always demonstrated a remarkably high tolerance for spiritual innovators, political cranks, and religious eccentrics. After all, the city was populated by people who came from somewhere else because they were looking for something different. So the good Friar Crespi can hardly be blamed for founding the place where, only a century later, a religious movement would arise that, within decades of its birth, would become the most serious rival his church would face not only in his own Spanish-speaking realm but all over the world. Even less could Father Crespi have anticipated that some scholars would interpret this movement as one that was restoring to Christianity many of the primal religious elements—visions, signs, wonders, and healings—that were edited out during the Protestant Reformation. But this is exactly what has happened. What we now call "pentecostalism," while it had many predecessors and has subdivided countless times since, started its globe-encircling career in Los Angeles, the city of Our Lady Queen of the Angels, in 1906. Dedicated by its founder to the gentle sovereign of the celestial powers, it became the city where spectacle, consumption, and

avarice achieved a zenith unparalleled in previous history. It provides the perfect starting point for the story of a religious movement that exemplifies the tangled interaction of religion and culture in the contemporary world.

By the turn of the century, Los Angeles was already a super-charged magnet. Its drawing power was supplied by one of the biggest booster campaigns ever to thump the tub for any American municipality. Only the 187th largest town by the 1880 census, and lagging far behind San Francisco, it had doubled its population twice by 1900 and was well on the way to surpassing its snooty northern rival. Its meteoric ascent defied the usual explanations. It lacked drinking water, a seaport (the San Pedro harbor was not completed until 1914), or anything else that might commend it to prospective investors. Nevertheless, real estate developers passionately promoted moving to Los Angeles as the secular equivalent of being born again. It was the place to begin life anew in a land awash with the only thing it did have in plentiful supply—sunshine. It was a city where piety and the hard sell met. As the journalist Morrow Mayo once wrote, "Los Angeles, it should be understood, is not a mere city. On the contrary, it is, and has been since 1888, a *commodity*; something to be advertised and sold to the people . . . like automobiles, cigarettes and mouth wash." And, he might have added, a special kind of secular salvation.

People came. They came by the tens and hundreds of thousands. As one historian of the city puts it, "For more than a quarter century, an unprecedented mass migration of retired farmers, small-town dentists, wealthy spinsters, tubercular schoolteachers, petty stock speculators, Iowa lawyers, and devotees of the Chautauqua circuit transferred their savings and small fortunes into Southern California real estate." Amid citrus farms and eucalyptus trees what was one day to become the megalopolis of the Pacific basin was beginning to take shape.

But Los Angeles boasted something other than sunshine. Oddly for a city that began with exclusively Indian, black, and Spanish settlers, and which had no Protestant church until 1850, by the beginning of the twentieth century it was being touted as the last

citadel of Anglo-Saxon racial purity, the final remaining bulwark against the hordes of European immigrants streaming into the cities of the east coast. Before the turn of the century, Boston had already elected its first non-Brahmin mayor, and Irish American political machines were flexing their muscle in several other cities. Not so in Los Angeles, where the previous Spanish culture had been dissolved into the "mission myth" of gentle Franciscans and grateful natives, while the white Protestant majority grew larger every day. In 1907, Joseph Widney, one of the first presidents of the University of Southern California, published his *Race Life of the Aryan People*, a celebration of Los Angeles as the future world capital of Aryan supremacy, a "new Rome" whose virile sons and daughters would one day lead the world. But even as Widney and his fellow Caucasian perfectionists dreamed of their utopia, a completely different prefiguration of the future of the city, and of the world, was about to take shape.

In view of the prevailing cultural tone of the city of the angels, William Joseph Seymour, who arrived by train from Houston in 1906, could hardly have been viewed as a welcome newcomer. The vision he carried with him to Los Angeles was in some ways the opposite of Widney's. Seymour had not come to bask in the sun, to make a fortune, or to purchase one of the wildly popular mission style bungalows, inspired by Helen Hunt Jackson's romantic novel *Ramona*. He had come to preach. More pointedly, he had come to preach about the New Jerusalem and the renewed experience of Pentecost which had now become available to all who would hear and believe.

Brushing off the dust of his journey in the railway station of the city of the sun, the preacher from Louisiana must have cut a sorry figure. Contemporary accounts describe him as quiet and unassuming but sometimes disheveled in appearance. Some note that he had a "vaguely unsettling effect" on the people he met, and a mysterious manner that suggested either demonic or divine power. He was also blind in one eye, the result of a youthful bout with smallpox. A white woman named Alma White who met Seymour before he came to California wrote that after she had heard him pray, "I felt that serpents and other slimy creatures

were creeping around me. After he had left the room, a number of the students said they felt he was devil possessed. . . . In my evangelistic and missionary tours I had met all kinds of religious fakirs and tramps, but I felt he excelled them all."

A photograph of Seymour, taken shortly after his arrival in Los Angeles, hardly bears out this severe description, possibly tinged with racial animus. The picture shows him as a stocky, almost rotund man. He is pictured with a group of ministers, six including himself. All the others are white. Seymour's dark face stands out dramatically. He is wearing a wrinkled black wool suit and vest. He clutches a black, leather-covered Bible with both hands. His face, with a visible smallpox scar on the right side of his forehead, is crowned by short kinky black hair with a razor cut part down the center. His chin is framed with a wispy beard. His open left eye seems to be sightless, and despite the slight smile curving his lips, he does indeed appear formidable, like a dormant volcano capable of unannounced eruption. Hardly devil-possessed, but also an unlikely recruit for the new Aryan paradise of health and wealth that Joseph Widney had in mind.

Shortly after his arrival Seymour preached his first sermon at Sister Hutchins's storefront church on Santa Fe Avenue. He was not a great success. Apparently Neely Terry had not given Sister Hutchins a comprehensive report about his theology. Indeed, the sister and the members of her little band firmly believed that whatever sanctification and the second baptism might mean, they had certainly already had them. They allowed that tongue speaking might well be one of the gifts the Spirit could bestow, but they did not make it nearly as central as Seymour did, at least at this early stage of his life. Later Seymour would come to a position similar to Sister Hutchins', but at this point the two clashed, and the result was that brother Seymour's partnership with Sister Hutchins in the Santa Fe Street church did not last long. One day when he arrived for the afternoon service, he found the doors had been locked.

Faced with a bolted door, Seymour did what thousands of pentecostal preachers have done in similar circumstances ever since. He carried on. With no money even to rent a storefront, he

began organizing prayer meetings in the humble homes of black friends and sympathizers. The pattern of fissiparation and proliferation, similar to the mitosis that allows one cell to produce thousands more, and has—perhaps ironically—contributed so much to the multiplication of pentecostal congregations around the globe, was already under way.

Some of those who gathered in Seymour's tiny new flock were from Sister Hutchins's church, and nearly all who came lived in the shabby section north of Temple Street. It was a part of Los Angeles the sunshine salesmen and civic bannermen probably wished was not there at all. The street on which one of these house worship meetings took place was Bonnie Brae Avenue, a name that was obviously some land peddler's public relations concoction, meant to evoke fragrant heather and windy moors. But the neighborhood had now fallen into straitened circumstances. Seymour's congregation at first consisted largely of black domestic servants and washerwomen, hardly the stuff of Joseph Widney's Aryan utopia. But Seymour, undeterred by the inauspiciousness of the venue or the low estate of the minuscule congregation—or even by the awkward fact that he himself had still not received the gift of tongues—continued to preach.

Now more and more people came. News of Seymour's house meetings spread by word of mouth, and—as it turned out—his message did not fall on stony soil. Los Angeles was ready for such a messenger. It was ready because the artfully crafted pipe dream of the land traffickers was beginning to sour. Industrial expansion had slowed to a crawl. Jobs were harder to find. By the following year, 1907, a genuine economic panic would set in.

Other things had changed as well. For the immigrants from the American heartland, the promise of a white, Protestant new Rome had already faded. Between 1900 and 1910, 5,500 blacks, 5,000 Mexicans, 4,000 Japanese, and more than 30,000 Europeans also arrived in Los Angeles. By 1910 "non-whites" and immigrants constituted fully 22 percent of its population. Like the original one, this new Rome found itself with "barbarians" within the gates. For many, the City of the Angels was already what it would become

in the scripts of the *noir* film writers two generations later, a sunset boulevard of broken dreams. The contest between rival visions of the meaning of human life was about to begin. Religiously speaking, the city—teeming with frustrated, disillusioned refugees from the south and midwest, who had brought with them their revivalist and Holiness pieties—was tinder ready to burn.

Seymour, it seems, lit the fire. Visitors—black and white—from Nazarene, Holiness, Baptist, and other congregations began to find their way to the little house of Brother and Sister Asberry at 214 North Bonnie Brae Avenue. They listened and prayed, and when they returned they brought their friends and neighbors. But still, no one had yet spoken in tongues. Then, on April 9, 1906, as Seymour was preparing to go to the meeting at Bonnie Brae, the friend at whose home he was staying, Edward Lee, a black janitor employed at the First National Bank, told him about a vision he had experienced. The Apostles, it seemed, had come to him and told him how to reclaim the gift of tongues. Both men prayed, and that night, in the modest house on North Bonnie Brae Avenue, according to pentecostal sacred history, “the power fell.” Several participants began praising God in unknown tongues, and among these was William Joseph Seymour himself.

Now there was no keeping the crowds away. Some came to seek the new power, some to chuckle, others to satisfy their curiosity. Frequently the visitors were so numerous they could not fit into the house, so Seymour began preaching from the porch. More came, and it became evident that enlarged quarters were needed. Acting quickly, Seymour’s friends located a vacant two-story, white-washed, wooden frame building at 312 Azusa Street which had once housed an African Methodist Episcopal church, but had been abandoned by the congregation and used first as a warehouse and then as a stable. By now it smelled of horses and had neither pews nor a pulpit. But Seymour and his friends seized the day. They rented it, cleaned it, placed timbers on upended nail kegs for benches, and piled up empty shoeboxes for a pulpit. On April 14, the first service was held.

Sometimes in religious history seemingly inconsequential happenings in obscure places turn out to have enormous repercus-

sions. Such was the case at Azusa Street. Within days the word was out all over Los Angeles. Something was happening in the little church in the colored section of town. There is a favorite saying among pentecostals: “The man with an experience is never at the mercy of the man with a doctrine.” What was happening in the white-washed former warehouse was that people were experiencing things they had never experienced before. But what were they exactly?

Nearly a century later it is not easy to say. The outer forms of worship themselves were not all that different from what one might have found in any Nazarene or Holiness church. Certainly for the black participants there was nothing all that unfamiliar. There were songs and testimonies, spontaneous sermons and exhortations, joyous shouts and prayers punctuated by sobs and tears. There were intercessions for the sick. Even the fact that people sang and spoke in an idiom that sounded to some like foreign languages, though unusual at the time, was not entirely new.

It is also clear that people did not crowd into the mission on Azusa Street because of a skillfully crafted publicity campaign. In the city that eventually elevated press agency to the rank of royalty and applied the terms “colossal” and “stupendous” to tiny pictures on rolls of celluloid, the little church on the other side of town used no publicity at all. There was never a printed order of service. There were no handbills or posters. For a while, the worshippers at Azusa Street resisted even putting an identifying sign on the front wall or door. If the Spirit wanted people to come that way, they reasoned, the Spirit would guide their footsteps. Meanwhile William J. Seymour presided over this gentle pandemonium with tact and an impressive capacity for personal diplomacy. The pine planks on the upended shipping boxes were placed in a square, so those who attended sat facing each other. People spoke from anywhere, but for those who felt especially anointed, the shoebox pulpit was generously open to anyone. No collections were taken, but just next to the exit a small receptacle awaited contributions to help pay the rent.

Why did people pour into the Azusa Street revival? First of all, they were hungry for a new hope. The fantasy fabricated by

the land promoters had obviously fallen apart. At the end of the yellow brick road, instead of a delectable nirvana-among-the-lemon-groves they discovered a booster behind a curtain cranking out noise and lights. As Morrow Mayo wrote, Los Angeles had been exposed as an "artificial city . . . pumped up under forced draught, inflated like a balloon, stuffed with rural humanity like a goose with corn." The effervescent eschatology of sunshine and wealth had gone flat. But the displaced and disillusioned poor people of Los Angeles, like many of their fellow Americans, found it hard to live without *some* eschatology. And Seymour had one. Not drawn from a public relations kit, his picture of the future tapped into the oldest dreams of the human race. God was doing a great new thing. History was reaching its climactic moment and there were signs and wonders to prove it. The New Jerusalem was coming. Now the rich and the proud would get their just deserts. The destitute, the overlooked, and the forgotten would come into their own. Even more central for Seymour, in a segregated America, God was now assembling a new and racially inclusive people to glorify his name and to save a Jim Crow nation lost in sin.

In retrospect the interracial character of the growing congregation on Azusa Street was indeed a kind of miracle. It was, after all, 1906, a time of growing, not diminishing, racial separation everywhere else. But many visitors reported that in the Azusa Street revival blacks and whites and Asians and Mexicans sang and prayed together. Seymour was recognized as the pastor. But there were both black and white deacons, and both black and white women—including Lucy Farrow—were exhorters and healers. What seemed to impress—or disgust—visitors most, however, was not the interracial leadership but the fact that blacks and whites, men and women, embraced each other at the tiny altar as they wept and prayed. A southern white preacher later jotted in his diary that he was first offended and startled, then inspired, by the fact that, as he put it, "the color line was washed away by the blood."

Other ethnic groups also seem to have trooped to Azusa Street to soak up the new shower of blessing. Records show that

a certain Abundio Lopez and his wife Rosa not only attended the revival but went on to carry the message back to San Diego. Such close physical contact and fraternizing was hardly the practice in California churches, or anywhere else for that matter. As one source puts it, "Indeed Seymour served as pastor of an anomalous congregation . . . with leadership drawn from black, white, Hispanic and other ethnic minorities." No longer the Aryan bulwark, this little piece of Los Angeles both foreshadowed and actualized another vision of the same city—albeit a tragically unfulfilled one—that would appear decades later: Los Angeles as the multi-ethnic world cosmopolis of the Pacific rim. For Seymour, however, it was not an earthly city at all. Nor was it the new Rome. It was the heavenly New Jerusalem, a place where the tongues of fire that had once fallen upon the waiting disciples in the upper room were descending again, this time on the faithful remnant.

Other motives brought people to Azusa Street. Inadvertently, the *Los Angeles Times* helped. A skeptical reporter heard the rumors and, notebook in hand, found his way to the black section of town. The next day his newspaper reported "wild scenes" and a "weird babble of tongues." Other papers dragged out the worn epithets. "Holy Kickers Carry on Mad Orgies," howled the *Los Angeles Record*. "Whites and Blacks Mix in a Religious Frenzy," grumbled the *Los Angeles Daily Times*. The dailies pictured Azusa Street in tones of amusement or menace. One hinted that the worshippers might soon begin sacrificing children. But the net result of the negative coverage was not what the newspapers anticipated. Even more people came. Some were intrigued. Some came to heckle. But, at least according to pentecostal legend, even the most hardened cynics found their hearts warmed. "They came to scorn and stayed to pray."

Nature did its bit as well. Four days after the opening of the Azusa Street mission, on the morning of April 18, 1906, the great San Andreas fault settled violently. San Francisco was shaken by a severe earthquake which, together with the fire that followed, almost completely destroyed the city. It was the most spectacular natural disaster the United States had ever seen, and one can well imagine the apocalyptic sentiments it evoked. For many this was

the first rumble of the coming judgment, the prelude to the Big One which, in those days was not foreseen merely as a geological tremor but as the crashing down of the final curtain. Holiness preachers throughout California and elsewhere made sure people did not miss the point. They churned out tracts and pamphlets warning that not much time was left before it would be all over. The San Francisco quake was mild compared to the roar of divine judgment soon to come.

In short, all the elements—except for the unusual interracial fellowship—that visitors found at Azusa Street were familiar ones. It was the particular combination that made it unique. Set in the context of the times, the revival persuaded participants that the Last Days were indeed approaching and that they were all pivotal actors in the grand new drama that God's Spirit was preparing to enact. The worm-eaten foundations of Babylon were tottering. The old world was passing away. The glorious city was about to descend. And they, the despised and rejected of the earth, were both its beneficiaries and its heralds. No wonder people came, and no wonder they went forth to proclaim the message to the world.

The only trouble was, of course, that the Last Days did not arrive, at least not in the form that the Azusa Street congregation expected. As months dragged into years, like the first Christians who also lived in anticipation of the imminent return of Christ, they found themselves with what appeared to be the same old world on their hands. Attacks from the established denominations became more shrill, but even more painful for Seymour was an outbreak of internal dissent fueled by some of his oldest comrades. It started with a visit to Azusa Street by Charles Parham, Seymour's one-time mentor in Houston. Exhilarated by the wonderful fruits of his ministry, Seymour had invited his former teacher to come and see for himself if indeed the outpouring of blessing before the end time had not in fact begun. For his part, Parham was undoubtedly curious. He had preached for years about the need for a new dispensation of the Spirit, so when reports about Azusa Street raced across the country he wanted to see it for himself.

Parham arrived in Los Angeles in October 1906 and was affectionately welcomed by Seymour who gladly made the shoebox pulpit available to the man who had let him listen through the cracked door. But Parham clearly did not like what he saw. What actually disturbed him is not so clear. Was it what appeared to him to be emotional excess, or was it the unseemly mixing of the races that upset him? It is hard to be sure since in his published comments the two objections are often fused. "Men and women," he wrote, "whites and blacks knelt together or fell across one another; frequently a white woman, perhaps of wealth and culture, could be seen thrown back into the arms of a 'buck nigger,' and held tightly thus as she shivered and shook in freak imitation of Pentecost. Horrible, awful shame!" Azusa Street was too much like the behavior at a "darkey revival," Parham complained. Nonetheless, he did accept Seymour's invitation to preach.

Parham seized the occasion to lambast the Azusa Street worshippers. They were engaging in "animism," he told them. Later, after his acrimonious break with Seymour, he wrote that when he entered the Azusa Street meeting he found "hypnotic influences, familiar-spirit influences, mesmeric influences, and all kinds of spells, spasms, falling in trances, etc." He insisted that "any strained exertion of body, mind, or voice is not the work of the Holy Spirit." This comment seems to support the idea that Parham was upset by the agitated atmosphere. But in another obvious reference to the same occasion he also wrote that he had seen people "crowded together around the altar like hogs, blacks and whites mingling; this should be enough to bring a blush of shame to devils, let alone angels, and yet this was all charged to the Holy Spirit." Whether it was the mesmerism or the mingling, Parham did not like it one bit, and he said so.

Understandably, Seymour and the elders—both black and white—of what was now known as the Pacific Apostolic Faith Movement did not appreciate Parham's condemnation. They believed that what was going on in their midst, both in the physical signs and wonders and in the breaking down of racial barriers, was in fact the work of the Holy Spirit. They asked Parham to leave and never come back. He moved across town where he

opened a rival, but largely ignored, evangelistic campaign. Finally, in December, he left Los Angeles for good, whatever claim he had once made to the leadership of the new pentecostal or "apostolic" movement forever shattered.

But Parham was not the last adversary Seymour would confront. In 1911, after the pentecostal movement had already sped across the nation and leaped the seas, one of his early white supporters, William H. Durham, also returned to Los Angeles. Seymour, of course, invited him to preach. But Durham, like Parham a few years earlier, chose the occasion to launch a polemical attack on Seymour. He argued that the "finished work of Christ on the cross" required a supplementary baptism by the Spirit, but that sanctification was not a "second work of grace." Durham's message seems to have had a certain appeal to the minority of Seymour's followers who had been raised in white Baptist and Presbyterian churches with their more Calvinistic theologies. But Seymour himself, and most of the members of the Azusa Street congregation, were devastated. Durham had undercut the entire theological rationale for the revival. It was as though a visiting preacher had spoken from Martin Luther's pulpit in Wittenberg and told his listeners that "justification by faith," the key idea of the Protestant Reformation, was not really true after all.

Now, sadly, and perhaps with a sense of irony, it was Seymour who locked the doors of the church—this time against Durham. But Durham persisted; he seemed to feel a special calling to oppose Seymour and wherever he went he fiercely pressed his case against Azusa Street. Many fledgling pentecostal congregations followed him. Seymour suspected that the dispute was as much a matter of race as it was of theology. A few years later he believed his suspicions were borne out when Durham's disciples joined others to organize a rival pentecostal denomination, the Assemblies of God, in which white ministers would not have to be led by blacks. The new, predominantly white denomination actually was formed for other reasons as well, but it did gain a large following, especially in those parts of the country where racial separation was strongest.

Seymour's altercation with Durham created a painful crisis for him. During his first years at Azusa Street, he had put central

emphasis on the gift of tongues both as the clearest evidence of baptism in the Spirit and as a harbinger of the Last Days. But now he began to change his mind. Finding that some people could speak in tongues and continue to abhor their black fellow Christians convinced him that it was not tongue speaking but the dissolution of racial barriers that was the surest sign of the Spirit's pentecostal presence and the approaching New Jerusalem. The early white pentecostals disagreed. Uncomfortable under black leadership and embarrassed by the opprobrium heaped on them for "worshipping with niggers," they finally opted to reject the interracial fellowship and keep the tongues.

Faced with sharp condemnation by people he had once considered his brothers in the faith, Seymour grew tired, and apparently he showed it. Attendance at the mission began to fall off. Bickering set in. When Seymour married Jenny Moore, one of the black leaders of the church, two of the white women who had helped steer the mission through its earliest storms jumped ship. Contending, at least for public consumption, that they opposed the marriage because Christ was coming again so soon, Clara Lum and Florence Crawford not only left town but took the address list of Seymour's popular journal *The Apostolic Faith* with them to Portland, Oregon, where they started their own mission, which is still flourishing today.

Seymour soldiered on. Still, the rancor that goes with such partings of the way is never easy to bear. The defection of the two sisters, the loss of the subscription list, and then more divisions fomented by white followers who chafed under black leadership all combined to weaken his influence. It also nearly broke his heart. Stung by the hurts inflicted on him by former friends he began to teach that tongue speaking was only *one* of the gifts of the Spirit, and might not, in some cases, be a gift at all. He may have had his detractors in mind when he told his people, "If you get angry, or speak evil, or backbite, I care not how many tongues you may have, you have not the baptism with the Holy Spirit." The genuine fruits of the Spirit, he now taught, were "love, joy, peace, long suffering, gentleness, goodness, meekness, faith, temperance."

Seymour had come to believe that the breaking of the color line was a much surer sign than tongue speaking of God's blessing and of the Spirit's healing presence. But now, with the racial barriers reerected by the white defections, Azusa Street became almost entirely black, and Seymour himself became increasingly defensive. In 1915 he published a long tome, *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Azusa Street Apostolic Faith Mission of Los Angeles, Cal.*, a rambling attack on his antagonists that hardly anyone read. Then, the pastor who had been willing to welcome virtually any visiting preacher into the shoebox pulpit, and who had distrusted all forms of ecclesiastical hierarchy, consecrated himself as bishop of his now diminished church. Further, he made sure the church's constitution stipulated that any successor to his office should be a "man of color." Having slipped almost completely out of view, the man who has more right to be called the "father of pentecostalism" died with little notice from his white colleagues in 1922.

There is another old photograph of Seymour, this one obviously from the last years of his life. The earlier one had been taken outside the Azusa Street church building. This photo was made in a studio. Seymour is alone. The white fellow evangelists with whom he had posed in the earlier picture are gone. Now the man who once looked so forceful and self-possessed appears tired. His hair has begun to go gray; he is definitely portly now, and his black suit and white vest are well pressed. He holds his Bible in his right hand, head erect, against the painted background of a waterfall. But the hint of volcanic force is no longer there, maybe because his left eye now somehow appears normal. Perhaps the photographer has touched it up.

A few years back I sought out the address at 312 Azusa Street to see if I could find any traces of its importance in the history of modern Christianity. I knew that after Seymour's death, his wife Jenny had attempted to carry on the work of the mission. Later I found out that eventually the congregation dwindled and the building was abandoned once again. Now I discovered that it was finally torn down and the property sold by the city to collect back

taxes. The site was purchased by a developer who turned it into a plaza to serve the "little Tokyo" district that had grown up there.

I had an eerie feeling when I learned this. In the Boston area where I live, we can still visit the Old North Church where Paul Revere is said to have hung his lanterns. In Europe tourists wander through cathedrals that are centuries old, and in India and Japan there are temples dating back thousands of years. But Los Angeles, like most of America, changes so quickly. Buildings and congregations come and go. History disappears overnight and time rushes on. Still, I wondered, does anyone ever pause at that plaza, perhaps at night when the traffic noises have subsided somewhat? If they do slow their steps, do they hear the echoes of shouts and songs? Do they harken to the glad testimonies of people whom the world had counted as nothing, but who here on this spot came to believe that God had touched them with the fire of the Spirit and had sent them forth on a mission to the world? At first I wished that someone would at least place a marker somewhere on the concrete to alert the passersby to what had happened there. But then I knew right away that this would not be appropriate. A carved plaque with an occasional bouquet of cut roses is hardly the memorial those early saints would have wanted. Instead, the Azusa Street memorial is something they could never have foreseen. It is a spiritual hurricane that has already touched nearly half a billion people, and an alternative vision of the human future whose impact may only be in its earliest stages today.

The Fire Spreads

*This is the work of God, and cannot
be stopped. While our enemies scold,
we pray and the fire burns.*

Household of God, Nov. 1907

THE FIRE THAT FELL on Azusa Street was only the beginning. News of the extraordinary happenings in Los Angeles, and then in other places, filled the pages of church newspapers and resounded through camp meetings and conference grounds. During the next few years, the pentecostal wave swirled across the nation, vaulted the seas, and seemed to touch nearly every outpost of human habitation. Its spread was not the accomplishment of professional media elites. As D. W. Myland, one of the movement's early interpreters, wrote in 1910, "God sent this latter rain to gather up all the poor and outcast, and make us love everybody . . . He poured it out upon the little sons and daughters, and servants and handmaidens . . . God is taking the despised things, the base things, and being glorified in them."

It was indeed the down-and-out who seemed most eager to hear the new message. The times were uncertain, and they were looking for something. Prosperity seemed eternally elusive. Rumors of war were abroad. Many people were fed up with conventional religion. For the first pentecostals, and for the many thousands who soon joined their ranks, the period from the Azusa Street revival until the outbreak of World War I was one of excitement, expectation, and jubilation. And as one can see from reading

what its enthusiasts wrote about it at the time, it was also a period in which a certain amount of hyperbole and embellishment is evident. But exaggeration is not an unfamiliar device in religious writing, and the early pentecostals apparently had witnessed wonders.

Consider the following: in October, 1907, at Simpson's Bible Tabernacle in New York City, Harold Moss saw the woman who was one day to become his wife float five or six feet in the air. We have it from his direct testimony. It was during one of the hundreds of revivals that broke out all over the country following the eruption at Azusa Street. During these often hectic meetings, railway cars, rented halls, tents, and churches were transmuted into scenes straight out of apostolic days. Anything, it seemed, could happen. People prayed all night, spoke in unknown tongues, leaped in the air, shouted, and fell to the floor in trances which the pentecostals called "being slain in the Lord." Levitations were rare, but there is this remarkable diary entry about his future spouse written by Moss himself:

People were slain everywhere under the mighty power of God including the ministers on the platform. The case of one young lady, Miss Grace Hammore (who since has become my wife), was quite remarkable. She was caught away in the Spirit and rendered wholly oblivious to anything natural. A sweet spirit of holy song came forth in notes like that of a nightingale and it filled the whole building. The power of God took hold of the physical and she was raised bodily from the floor three distinct times. She afterwards stated she had seen a vision of a golden ladder and had started to climb it.

One finds such stories time and again in Hindu mythology and Catholic folk legends, as well as in the current genre of Latin American literature sometimes called "magical realism." Miss Hammore's experience, however implausible it must seem to most readers, is only one of countless examples of healings, exorcisms, and miraculous signs that crowd the diaries and participants' descriptions of the early pentecostal meetings. Celestial glory often filled the wind-beaten canvas tents, and glowing halos appeared from heaven. The official minutes of a revival sponsored by the

Church of God records that a woman who had never had a music lesson was so touched by the power that she sprinted to the organ and played beautiful music. One exultant convert wrote something that reminded me of Dante's description of heaven in *The Divine Comedy* as the place where he heard the *riso del universo*, the laughter of the universe. This man, who probably never heard of Dante, says that when the Spirit entered him he felt as though "everything in my body was laughing with unspeakable joy."

Fire was especially in evidence. Some saw it in long luminous streaks, others in huge bright spheres. When reports began to drift back from pentecostal revivals abroad, the flaming marvels became even more spectacular. In Wales, "colored lights were often seen, like balls of fire, during the revivals there." In India, it was reported, the girls at a Christian mission school who had prayed for revival after hearing about Azusa Street became so overwhelmed when the Spirit fell that they refused to eat. Instead they collapsed into a trance and when they returned to normal consciousness told of seeing a great white throne, a resplendently robed throng, and "a glory so bright they could not bear it." Soon "the whole school was aflame" and classes had to be suspended. That night the holy fire returned again upon one of the girls who was still seeking. Her roommate, so the report goes, "seeing fire envelop her, brought a pail of water to dash upon her."

In another part of India, at a missionary orphanage for girls, pictures depicting the life of Christ appeared supernaturally on the walls. "The figures in the pictures moved and were in color. Each would last from two to ten minutes, then gradually faded away, to appear with a new scene." The chronicler who passes on this news appears to be aware that small children sometimes possess extremely creative imaginations, so he judiciously adds that these high-resolution pictorial transmissions appeared not only to the children but to "eight missionaries, native Christians living nearby, and even heathen coming to see the wonderful sight."

It goes on. One can hardly open a book of pentecostal reminiscences from the vertiginous years that followed the Azusa Street revival without signs and wonders tumbling out of the pages. At

one midwest revival the "weight of glory" was so heavy the people could not even remain seated but had to sprawl full length on the floor. Even the evangelist says that he simply lay on the low platform on his face "while God ran the meetings." When it was time for the preachers to move on to the next town but the means were not at hand, train tickets appeared from nowhere. Money, like manna, was unexpectedly pressed into the hands of destitute evangelists at just the last minute, in answer to prayer but usually by people they had never met before.

I admit that when I first began to peruse these letters and testimonies I was puzzled and sometimes a little annoyed. What had gotten into these people? Did they really believe that the Spirit had enabled people like Ms. Hammore to suspend the law of gravity? Who really saw the aureoles, the incandescent halos, the miraculous moving pictures? How could they be sure the inspired organist had never had a lesson? Was this all just a matter of runaway credulity, mass hysteria, or overwrought salesmanship? What in the world was going on?

As I continued to read, however, sometimes in fading, fragile pamphlets and brittle old books that had not been taken from the library shelves for decades, a different attitude crept in. I found I was being caught up myself. Not lifted off the floor, but swept along, at least temporarily, in the heady excitement and breathless joy of this first generation of pentecostal believers. So I decided to let myself go, to take the plunge and bob along for a while in the fabulous world their writings conjure, the way one might, for example, in reading a short story by Jorge Luis Borges or one of Gabriel García Márquez's novels.

It was a satisfying change. I quickly found that my new attitude allowed me to follow the spectacular spread of pentecostalism better than either credulity or skepticism could. As I pored over these archaic accounts, it became clear to me that for those early converts, the baptism of the Spirit did not just change their religious affiliation or their way of worship. It changed everything. They literally saw the whole world in a new light. Spirit baptism was not just an initiation rite, it was a mystical encounter. That is why they sometimes sounded like Saint Teresa of Avila or

Saint John of the Cross, although they had probably never heard of either one. That is why they spoke of an "absence of fleshly effort" and "walking softly with God." Their own tingling flesh convinced them that a whole new epoch in history was beginning and they were already living in it. In the words of Paul "old things had passed away and all things had become new." As one grateful convert wrote, "It seemed as though the whole world and all the people looked a different color." Sixty years later a teenage pentecostal boy in Chile testified in nearly the same words. "When I was fifteen," he said, "a work was done in me. I experienced repentance, I began to weep, and I asked God to pardon my sin and to transform my life. And I heard a voice say to me: 'Your sins are forgiven,' and in the same instant my life completely changed . . . when I left the building I had the impression that everything had changed; the streets, the trees were different. It was a very poor neighborhood, old houses, unpaved streets. But for me, everything was new, everything was changed."

As a theologian I had grown accustomed to studying religious movements by reading what their theologians wrote and trying to grasp their central ideas and most salient doctrines. But I soon found out that with pentecostalism this approach does not help much. As one pentecostal scholar puts it, in his faith "the experience of God has absolute primacy over dogma and doctrine." Therefore the only theology that can give an account of this experience, he says, is "a narrative theology whose central expression is the testimony." I think that he is right, and it may well be that the reason for the kind of magical realism imbuing many pentecostal testimonies is the same one that pushes people toward dancing and jumping and praising in strange tongues: the experience is so total it shatters the cognitive packaging.

The lightning spread of the pentecostal movement was not like the dispersal of some new idea. It was more like the spread of a salubrious contagion. First thousands, then hundreds of thousands, then tens of millions were struck by the Spirit. However small the sparks at Azusa Street were, within a few decades, pentecostalism had become a full-fledged forest fire. One of the reasons it spread so quickly was that people were waiting and praying

for it. For African Americans the period from 1890 to 1920 was what the historian Samuel Eliot Morrison calls the worst in their postemancipation history. But it was also a bad time for poor whites who also responded to the pentecostal preachers. Populists and progressives sought to turn back the growing power of the monopolies, but with limited success. America's graduation to the status of an empire with its acquisition of Puerto Rico and the Philippines did not bring much comfort to hard-pressed farmers or unemployed urban workers. The vote for Eugene V. Debs's Socialist party increased tenfold between 1900 and 1920. Furthermore, mainly among the lower classes, people had become dissatisfied with the coldness and empty formality of the churches. For decades Christians had been praying for a great revival, for a new downpouring of the Spirit: "Send us another Pentecost!" When word came that, first in Los Angeles and then in other locations, it had actually begun, they could hardly wait to hear direct testimonies from those who had actually experienced the new descent of the Spirit.

It was not just individuals who responded, but whole congregations and in some cases whole denominations. In June of 1907, leaders of the black denomination called the Church of God in Christ came to Azusa Street, stayed a few weeks, then returned to transform their whole church into what is still the largest black pentecostal denomination in the world. The historian Douglas J. Nelson believes that this church may have the best claim to being the direct descendent of the original Pentecost "insofar as both fellowships began with the disappearance of racial and other barriers between believers amid exuberant joy and glossolalic utterance." While white pentecostals, he says, almost always see tongue speaking itself as the principal distinguishing mark of their faith, blacks understand tongues to be a mark of the divine power "which brings people together in reconciliation . . . creating a new community in Christian brotherhood."

When the conversion of an entire cluster of churches was at issue the baptism of the Spirit sometimes assumed commensurately epochal proportions. A very important one took place in 1908 in Cleveland, Tennessee, when a pentecostal preacher named

G. B. Cashwell, who had also been baptized in the Spirit at Azusa Street, attended the general assembly of a recently organized white Holiness—but not yet pentecostal—sect called the Church of God. This was no ordinary church gathering. It was the annual conference at which virtually every preacher and many lay people were present, and all of them had been praying for a new Pentecost.

At the close of the conference, most of the participants attended the revival at which Cashwell was preaching at a nearby Church of God congregation. Enthusiasm was running high as rumors of a great nationwide awakening, maybe the "latter rain," circulated among the delegates. To a hushed and expectant crowd, Cashwell described the outpouring of blessings in Los Angeles and testified to his own Spirit baptism. While he spoke the congregation could see that A. J. Tomlinson, the General Overseer—the highest officer of the church—who was seated on the stage near the speaker, was listening with rapt attention. Suddenly, to everyone's amazement, Tomlinson fell out of his chair and crumpled "in a heap on the rostrum at . . . Cashwell's feet."

While he lay there Tomlinson received the pentecostal blessing and, according to his own later testimony, spoke in ten different languages. This opened the door. The entire Church of God and all its branches, with only a few congregations dissenting, became pentecostal within a few years. Tomlinson himself died in 1943, but according to a poll conducted by *Time* magazine in January 1992, the Church of God is today the fastest growing of the predominantly white denominations in America, up 183 percent since 1965.

Not everyone welcomed either the message or the messengers with such gusto. Naturally most of the more established churches were embarrassed and angered by the unseemly goings on. These holy rollers gave all the churches a bad name. But there were other reasons for their opposition as well. After people found their own "personal pentecost," either at Azusa Street or at one of its offspring congregations, and then returned to their own churches brimming with newfound enthusiasm, they were often in for a rude awakening. Their fellow church members

ridiculed, shunned, or expelled them—sometimes all three. In response to this often unexpected hostility, the new converts soon took to warning their opponents that the established churches were fallen and corrupt if not minions of the Evil One. A favorite text used by the pentecostals to describe the churches that disowned them was drawn from Revelation 3:15 where it was first addressed to the congregation at Laodicea. In the unvarnished King James version, the translation that was favored by these rebuffed preachers, reads:

I know thy works, that thou art neither hot nor cold: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

The early pentecostals were obviously not ecumenists, at least not in today's sense. If God was now forming a new church to replace the old, corrupt ones, then why waste time worrying about ecclesiastic unity? Most people who became pentecostals joined the new movement from other denominations, so were not eager to cooperate with them. They had left them for what they considered to be good reasons, and now they had also been rejected by them. Such churches, some of them believed, were led by wolves in sheep's clothing, craven hirelings who were misleading the flock. "Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers," Paul had plainly said. They took him at his word, and they urged the members of other churches who dropped in on their revivals to do the same. Many did. And this did not endear the pentecostals to the other churches.

The religious press in the first decade of pentecostal history teems with blistering attacks on the new movement. But of all the coarse assaults, by far the most ferocious came from the fundamentalists. It is especially important to understand this vendetta because today many people mistakenly lump pentecostalism together with fundamentalism, in part because both emerged at about the same time, and they shared certain features. In recent years the relationship has become complex, but in the early years of each they were antagonists. Fundamentalists were obsessed with doctrinal purity. Their targets were the advocates of higher

biblical criticism, modernism, Darwinism, and the Social Gospel, whereas for pentecostals the real enemy was the "coldness" of conventional religion and the remoteness of the God preached by the downtown churches. Pentecostals railed against "man-made creeds and dead rituals." In some respects, especially in their emphasis on the need for a personal experience of God, they were closer to some of the Protestant liberals of the day than they were to the fundamentalists. The difference was that while the liberals liked to talk about the importance of religious experience, the pentecostals seemed to generate it.

If the mainline churches merely disliked the pentecostals, it is not an exaggeration to say that the fundamentalists loathed them. The early attacks on the Azusa Street mission by Parham and Durham were the opening fusillades in what soon became an all-out fundamentalist war against the pentecostals. Some of the most vituperative attacks came from highly respected conservative protestant theologians. The staunch Presbyterian and unyielding fundamentalist Benjamin B. Warfield condemned the pentecostals by lumping them together with Roman Catholics and others who believed that miracles still took place today. The Lord, insisted this professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, had not performed a single miracle since the days of Peter and Paul. Another conservative theologian, H. A. Ironside, fired off the most influential antipentecostal barrage in 1912. In a book entitled *Holiness, the False and the True*, he asserted of the pentecostals that "superstition and fanaticism of the grossest character find a hotbed in their midst." Still another fundamentalist, G. Campbell Morgan, trumped all the others by declaring that pentecostalism was "the last vomit of Satan."

What clearly bothered the fundamentalists more than anything else was the same issue that has divided them from the pentecostals ever since: the question of spirit versus letter. While both parties claimed to believe that both the Bible and the Holy Spirit are sources of authority, clearly the pentecostals put much more weight on the Spirit than the fundamentalists do. In their growing emphasis on the authority of the letter, fundamentalists soon began to teach that every single word of the Bible was verbally inspired

and that to differ with them on this novel view of scripture was to read oneself out of Christianity altogether.

It is important to recall the issue that underlies this early animosity because in the decades that followed, as many white pentecostals, uneasy about the interracial character of their movement, allied themselves with more socially acceptable white fundamentalists, these same issues would surface again. Pentecostal "converts" to fundamentalist theologies and worship patterns were never entirely comfortable with them, and today many pentecostals regret that they ever made the move in the first place. Recalling this history explains the effort some pentecostals are now making to cut their ties with fundamentalists and even with the more moderate evangelicals, and to restore what they believe to be the original pentecostal focus on the direct experience of God. Whether this effort is a massive defection or a return to the original roots is an issue of considerable controversy among pentecostals today.

As if they did not have enough snipers firing on them from the outside, the pentecostals could also become their own worst enemies. Even before Parham and Durham tried to subvert Seymour's ministry the new movement had begun to splinter and divide. Then, as the years went by, more disputes broke out. Arguments arose about whether sanctification was a two-stage or a three-stage process, whether the wearing of neckties was worldly, and whether building a storm cellar suggested a lack of faith in God. Some received revelations that prohibited them from drinking tea or coffee or from eating pork. One sister, Abbie C. Morrow, presaged later spiritual diet regimes by insisting that the Bible taught believers to stick exclusively to fruits, grains, vegetables, and nuts, but she did not win many followers. Some preachers accused others of undue emotionalism, and then were faulted themselves for relapsing into coldness and formalism. Within a few years the entire movement was torn apart by a debate over whether to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (which had been traditional for centuries) or in just the name of Jesus, which some pentecostals insisted was the practice in The Acts of the Apostles (they were right) and therefore the theologically correct formulation for these Last Days.

The fractiousness seemed endless, and with no pope or presbytery to adjudicate disputes, the arguments raged on and on. The movement that had started as a reaction against dogma fell into doctrinal bickering. Newly born denominations, upholding teaching or practice that was essential to its leaders, split off from previous ones, merged and split again. The organizational chaos of all this cantankerousness can render the task of anyone who tries to make sense out of the first decades of pentecostal history very taxing. Take this excerpt from Vinson Synon's careful history *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States*, for example. Here he describes one of the many small pentecostal denominations:

In 1911 the group dropped the name Apostolic Faith Movement and accepted credentials from Mason's Church of God in Christ. At the same time . . . another group adopted the name "Church of God" . . . without knowledge of Tomlinson's church with headquarters in Cleveland, Tennessee. At the second meeting . . . the church changed its name to The Church of God in Christ. . . . Thus by 1911, three groups operated under the name of Mason's church.

And so on. At this point even the most elaborate flow chart can no longer help, and all but the most patient and scrupulous aficionados find their eyes tiring and patience running thin. And yet, it does not really matter, since pentecostals were always suspicious of organizations anyway. Some considered them works of the devil. Just as the growth of the movement was not caused by public-relations know-how, it was not produced by organizational wizardry either.

The most amazing thing about the runaway divisiveness in the young pentecostal movement is that while the spats and squabbles continued, so did its spread. The more the pentecostals fought, the more they multiplied. One of the most astonishing features of the movement is that it seems to thrive not only on opposition (which many religious movements have), but also on division. This is another reason for its growth. Wherever pentecostalism goes it evokes both joy and anger, gratitude and rejection, polemic

and schism. In Los Angeles this spiritual conspiracy, literally from across the tracks, with its message of a new outpouring of the Holy Ghost, caused such alarm and consternation in the other churches that those who accepted it were locked out. Over the years pentecostals have gotten accustomed to exclusion and excommunication. But, as in these early years, what followed rejection was a deeper determination to move on and continue. When Seymour's early sponsor, Sister Hutchins, turned her back on the offended Baptists and betook herself and her flock to the storefront across town, and when Seymour himself walked away from the barred door of the church to start the prayer meetings on Bonnie Brae Street, they signaled a tendency that has continued ever since. Resistance from without and friction within have led not to death but to new life. "If the world hates you," the scriptures say, "fear not, for I have overcome the world." The pentecostals might add, "Where a falling out among the brothers and sisters takes place, there will be two churches instead of one, then three or four."

This pattern of division and proliferation continued apace in the pentecostal movement roughly until the outbreak of World War I. Then it slowed down, though only temporarily, between the two wars, but blazed forth again after World War II, this time finding its "fields white unto harvest" in the black ghettos of urban America and in the growing cities of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. It is time now, however, to step back from the story of the expansion of this twentieth-century reformation and to ask a very basic question. Why did this fire blaze around the world? Why did pentecostalism, in all its variants and subdivisions, so quickly become such an enormously successful religious movement?



As the nineteenth century ended, hopes for a new Pentecost—a reuniting of the tribes scattered at the Tower of Babel—gripped the American imagination. At the World's Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago at the Colombian Exposition in 1893 (whose White City is pictured here), religious scholars declared that the new Pentecost was at hand. Instead, the participants bickered and later a devastating fire destroyed the palaces of the exposition. (Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago)



The worldwide pentecostal movement was born in a swept-out warehouse that had been used as a livery stable on Azusa Street in Los Angeles, California, in 1906. It is pictured here in the 1920s before it was razed to make way for a shopping plaza.