

The Azusa Street Revival

Revisited

A lecture presented at Beeson Divinity School, Sanford University in Birmingham, Alabama on October 3, 2001. The Theme of the Conference: "Pilgrims on the Sawdust Trail"

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American Urban University Press

P.O. Box 740039

San Diego, CA 92174

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Good morning! Dr. Smith, thank you kindly for the warm introduction. It has indeed been a great privilege to visit Beeson again. This is my third visit here. I'm indebted to the Honorable Dean Timothy George for the gracious hospitality and the encouragement that he has given to me on each of these visits. I'm happy to join with you in this wonderful experience of following the Sawdust Trail. It leads us this morning to a broken down shanty, a former livery stable, in a depressed neighborhood, in the city of Los Angeles where the Azusa Revival broke out.

I'm a third generation Pentecostal, Holiness member. My grandparents and my parents were saved about ten (10) years after the Azusa Revival. During that period there was a wave of anti-intellectualism, and so thee were those who were certain that Jesus would return most any day. One day my older siblings came home and informed my father, who had only a third grade education, that our pastor told us, "that Jesus is coming real soon, therefore we don't need to go to school anymore." My father looked at his children and said, "Yes, you're going back to school tomorrow and if Jesus comes, he's going to find you at school."

I had the privilege of growing up in a home where we heard our parents and grandparents talk about the Azusa Revival. The revival started as a concerned group of women gathered in a home in Los Angeles. The prayer meeting had grown and began to touch so many lives that they moved from the home to an address on Bonnie Brae Street. The fervency of the prayer and manifestations of a strong

visitation of God, began to attract people from all over the city of Los Angeles. Day after day, it was reported that there was such a crowd of worshipers and spectators that the city fathers took note of this phenomenon. One morning during the exuberance of praise and shouting, the porch collapsed. There was more commotion. Following that experience, the revival soon moved to 312 Azusa Street which had once been a Methodist Church, but had been more recently converted into a livery stable. It was there that the women recognized that they needed help in the revival, and they sent for W. J. Seymour, a preacher from Houston, Texas. He came at their invitation and joined them in prayer until there was an outpouring and a touch that was felt around the world.

It was my privilege to be acquainted with some of the men who were involved directly in that great revival. I attended my first Holy Convocation at Mason Temple in Memphis in 1946. I shall never forget the powerful sermon that was preached by Bishop Charles Harrison Mason from Philippians 2: 12-13. I can see and hear him now, "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do what pleases Him."

My parents did not have the advantage of hospitalization and health insurance. They were the parents of fourteen (14) children. I was the ninth of the fourteen. Every time mama would get pregnant she would write to Bishop Mason and inform him, "I'm pregnant, pray that the baby will come and be healthy and well." We were not born in hospitals. There was a mid-wife, Capitola Bennett who delivered us. The cost was \$5.00 each. Bishop Mason prayed and the children came, and we were healthy and we were blessed by God.

It was Bishop Mason, who founded the Church of God in Christ, in 1897, as a Holiness Church. But in 1906, Bishop Mason along with C. P. Jones, D. J. Young and other left the south for Los Angeles to discover what was happening as the revival fires were burning.

It was a great privilege to know Bishop C. H. Mason, a man small in stature, a humble man, who traveled the length and breadth of this nation establishing churches. He was contemporary of Father Divine, Sweet Daddy Grace and Prophet Jones. It is significant that the Church of God in Christ had less than a million members when Bishop Mason died in 1961. Today, there are more than five million. When Father Divine, Daddy Grace and Prophet Jones died, their movement generally died with them.

It was also my privilege to meet and fellowship with another person who received the baptism of the Holy Ghost at Azusa in 1907. He was Bishop Mack E. Jonas. Bishop Jonas was a very colorful character who was remembered for his fiery preaching. He was interviewed by Leonard Lovett. That interview is included and reported in Vinson Synan's book on the Aspects of Pentecostal and Charismatic Origins. Jonas became the Bishop of the Church of God in Christ in Ohio. He passed away in about 1973. After I moved to California in 1959, I had a chance to get

acquainted with other pioneers who were present at the Azusa Revival, including a colorful evangelist named Elder Kayhee, and a pastor in Los Angeles, Pastor Lawrence Catley, who preached at St. Stephen's a few months before he went home to be with the Lord.

I did not have the privilege of meeting other principal participants in the revival, but several of these principals must be noted here. Charles F. Parham who was the founder of the Apostolic Faith movement in Topeka, Kansas. He also founded the Bethel Bible School in 1900. He was a former Methodist pastor. Parham popularized the doctrine, that speaking in tongues is the initial evidence of being baptized in the Holy Spirit. Seymour was a student of Parham. This relationship was strained after Parham visited Seymour in 1907 at Azusa, where he objected to the predominant African influence in the worship. Also, he objected to the fact that there was what he termed, race mixing in the worship and in the fellowship. Parham for some reason was never able to shake the cultural influence of racism. He was a strong supporter of the Klan and had difficulty accepting what God was doing in Azusa to remove the color barrier.

W. J. Seymour was born in 1870 in Centerville, LA, the son of a slave. He moved to Houston where he became acquainted with the Pentecostal teachings and enrolled in Parham's school. However, because of segregation, he was not allowed to sit in the classroom with the white students. He had to sit outside the window or in the hallway and listen as best as he could. But he was hungry for God and he endured that humiliation and sought after the Word and the living God. It was from Houston that he was called to Los Angeles to join with those praying women who were seeking a new experience of a deeper spiritual life. When he went to Los Angeles, he had not yet received the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues. Yet he believed that the blessing was promised to him, so he continued to pray and to seek the in-filling until he received that blessing in 1906.

Charles Price Jones, another principal participant, born in 1865, was a great poet, song writer and gospel preacher. He had a wonderful experience with God, but he did not believe that speaking in tongues, was the initial evidence of being filled with the Spirit of God. He and Mason disagreed about this doctrine. This was the basis of the conflict between Price and Mason. They decided to go their separate ways and this conflict resulted in the separation and formation of the Church of Christ in Holiness in 1907.

Let's look at the spiritual climate and attitudes that prevailed preceding the Azusa Revival experience. There were still tremendous influences from the Welch Revival under Evan Roberts. There had been outpourings of the Holy Spirit in various parts of the world. In Los Angeles, there were a group of women who gathered to pray and to seek God. They were gathering in prayer, first, because there was a deep hunger for God. They wanted God's will. They wanted to see the manifestations of His power and of His presence. Secondly, these women sought God in prayer daily, because there was a deep dissatisfaction with the spiritual status quo. They were

tired of religion. They longed for a living relationship with God. The conditions in the church, characterized by worldliness and carnality disturbed them deeply. They wanted something more. Further, these praying women had a desire for intimacy with God. These were captured by a sense of holy expectation. They saw in the Book of Acts a promise that God would send a season of refreshing from His presence. They believed that God would keep that promise. Now, prior to these praying women meeting in Los Angeles, Brother Parham had received the gift of the Holy Spirit in Topeka, Kansas. There were several others who had received this experience and his Bible Schools in Topeka and in Houston were beginning to influence and touch the lives of many people. Yes, there was an atmosphere of expectation. There was deep dissatisfaction. There was also a hunger for God.

Something else happened prior to the outpour. Those who gathered in either Topeka, Houston or Los Angeles engaged in repentance for sins and spiritual coldness. There was daily study of the scriptures. There was prayer, prayer, and more prayer. The scriptures that seemed to inform and motivate and inspire included Joel 2: 28, "In the last days I will pour out of my spirit upon all flesh." Also, these prayer warriors saw in the book of Acts the pattern for the local fellowship. They believed the promise was for all believers and that miracles, signs and wonders was evidence of revival. They rejected racism, claiming Peter's sermon in Acts 10: 34-43, settled the issue. Peter declares, "I perceive that God is no respecter of person. Out of every nation he that fears God and works righteousness is acceptable with him." They were captured by the expression in verse 44. The Holy Ghost fell on the Gentiles from the laying on of hands. They were moved by the experience that is recorded in Acts 19, where the disciples went to Ephesus and found believers who had not yet heard nor received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Another scripture that seemed to have opened up in their minds and in their spirits, was Hebrews 12:14, "Follow peace with all men and holiness without which no man shall see the Lord." Then there was the clear word of instruction from Jesus recorded in Mark 16: 15-18. A word that gave them clear direction regarding evangelism, "Go ye into all the world...." A word that gave to them the assurance of the believer's authority in the faith and also God's promise to demonstrate His power. "Ye shall lay hands upon the sick and cast out demons, and if you drink any deadly thing it will not harm you."

Vinson Synan stated in his book, "The Azusa Street Revival is commonly regarded as the beginning of the modern Pentecostal movement." Although many persons had spoken in tongues before, but here this practice of speaking in tongues was brought to the attention of the whole world. It served as the catalyst for the formation of scores of Pentecostal denominations. Directly or indirectly, practically all of the Pentecostal groups in existence today can be traced through the lineage to the Azusa Missions. Synan further states, "that Parham laid the foundation, the doctrinal foundation of the movement while Seymour served as the catalytic agent for its popularization." The early Pentecostal movement was neither Negro or White, but interracial. It was conducted by Seymour on the basis of complete racial and sexual equality. In this atmosphere of racial and sexual equality there emerged a

Pentecostal vision of unity predicated on a common life in the Spirit, characterized by a common life of holiness and entire sanctification drawn from the Wesleyan doctrines and teachings.

Frank Bartleman, who was present at Azusa, has written an interesting book entitled, *Azusa Street*. He states that "Brother Seymour was recognized as the nominal leader for the group, but we had no Pope. There was no hierarchy, we were brethren. We had no human program. The Lord himself was leading. No subjects of sermons were announced ahead of time, and no special speakers for such an hour." As a matter of fact, it is said that Brother Seymour would sit with his head in a shoe box praying during the service. When the Spirit would move upon him, he'd look up and hand the Bible to one of the men and say, "Now you preach." No one knew what might be coming, what God would do. Bartleman says, "We only recognized God. All were equal."

Not everyone understood or supported this revival. As a matter of fact, there was a front page story ridiculing the Meeting, in the *Los Angeles Times* dated April 18, 1906. "A new sect of fanatics, breaking loose in a tumbled down shack at 312 Azusa. These devotees are of the weird doctrine practice, the most fanatical rites, preach the wildest theories and work themselves into a state of mad excitement in their peculiar zeal."

This kind of publicity only served to advertise the meeting and increased the interest and attendance. Many of those who came experienced salvation, the baptism of the Holy Ghost and miracles of healing. According to Bartleman and other reporters, the liberating power of the Holy Spirit was manifested. Some were set free. Sinners were born again. The economically and socially depressed were set free. Racist were set free. Women were set free. There was the liberating power of God's presence that manifested itself in the gathering of people from all races and all ethnic groups in the Los Angeles area and from around the world.

Now a word about the worship at Azusa. It was holy disorder, spontaneous and unstructured. At first there were no instruments, no hymnals. They sang as the Spirit gave them a song. The new song; songs that they sang were unrehearsed, but they were beautiful. Some of the major songs that they borrowed from the *Sawdust Trail* were songs like, "The Comforter Has Come, oh spread the news around wherever men are found, The Comforter had Come!" Another favorite song was, "Fill Me Now with thy hollowed presence, come oh come and fill me now; Joy unspeakable and full of glory." There was that favorite song, "Love Lifted Me." The singing was enthusiastic. Then there was prayer, prayer and more prayer. Speaking in tongues, both Glossolalia, the unknown tongues, and in languages that were known. Bartleman tells the story of a missionary from the Philippines who became critical of the meeting and desired to discredit what was going on. But when he heard persons in that meeting speaking in dialects from the Philippines from some of the tribes that he was attempting to penetrate, he recognized that God was at work here. For these people had not been to the Philippines nor had they studied

the dialects. There were other critics who came, who were from China, Russia and other parts of the world who heard unlearned men and women, under the power of God, speak in their languages just as had been experienced on the day of Pentecost. It was a marvelous experience. For in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Los Angeles, people heard the gospel and the witness of God's truth in their own language. From 1906 to 1909, people came from all over the United States and from Africa and Europe. Those who came and experienced the Holy Spirit baptism returned to their homes with fresh vision and power. They were equipped for service with the message of repentance, salvation, worship, healing, holy living, deliverance and the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

But there were some excesses at Azusa and the disorder was sometimes unbearable. There were times when there was clearly no one in charge. There were occasions when there was a seeming predominance of the flesh and carnality. There were satanic attempts of discredit what God was doing. There were also the Pentecostal pride that emerged. Because of what God was doing, there was a sense that we've got a corner on this thing and we're somehow better than those from whom we have separated.

The tragedy of the missed opportunities of Azusa. The record is clear that God did something powerful at the Azusa Revival. During an era when racism, sexism and classism were accepted as normal, the Azusa Revival welcomed all races, classes and sexes in equals in the fellowship. Blacks, Whites, Asians, Hispanics and other groups were represented in the worship and welcomed under the same roof at 312 Azusa. It was reported that as many as fifteen to twenty ethnic and nationality groups would gather at the Communion Table. An observer wrote, "The color line was washed away by the blood of Jesus." No wonder Parham, a racist who came to Azusa in 1907 was unhappy with the integration that he observed. He was unhappy with the integration that he observed. He was unhappy because it did not fit his pattern of how the church should look. He attempted to stop the move of God, but he could not stop what God was doing. For just a brief period then there was a realization of the answer to the prayer that Jesus offered to God in John 17. There was a realization of the answer to that prayer. Regrettably, the power to speak in new tongues, to heal the sick, to cast out demons, was not appropriated to rebuke the spirit of division and racism that surfaced. In 1907, the spirit of division emerged over the issue of speaking in tongues. C. H. Mason and C. P. Jones could not agree on the issue of speaking in tongues being the initial sign of being filled with the Holy Spirit. They failed to appropriate the Holy Ghost power to resolve the conflict, so the first major separation occurred as a result of a conflict between the two black leaders. Mason became the leader of the Church of God in Christ and C. P. Jones separated and became the leader of the Church of God Holiness. Now, the two men continued to be on friendly and speaking terms, but somehow they missed God. They should not have broken relationship. There was no need for another denomination. God had put them together.

Then there was another division that arose. This was a division not about speaking in tongues, but it was about race. Segregation laws prohibited Blacks and Whites and Hispanics from social or spiritual mixing. The laws in Arkansas, Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama and throughout the south said Blacks and Whites could not worship together. In 1914, Bishop Mason met with the White Elders who were ordained in the Church of God in Christ. In that historic meeting in Hot Springs, White and Black brothers in Christ failed to understand the burden of history and the opportunity to speak Biblical truth to the powers of racism and segregation. It was a Kairos moment when the course of U. S. History could have been changed. A fatal choice was made to conform to the racist laws rather than to resist. God had spoken, he had manifested His power. He had revealed his will for a united church. For a moment just suppose the White, Brown, and Black brethren had appropriated the Holy Ghost power they had received to oppose the evils of segregation and racism. From 1906 to 1914, the Church of God in Christ was racially mixed. Just suppose that the whole Pentecostal/Holiness movement, that is today more than four hundred million strong, had mustered the courage of Martin Luther or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Niemuller and Martin Luther King, and declared to the powers in each state, "We are brothers and sisters. We are in covenant, we will not be separated by your of laws. We are members of the family of God. We will worship and minister and fellowship together or we will go to jail together or we will die together. He we stand, so help us God." Without doubt such a position would have resulted in lynchings and martyrdom, but God's truth would have won in the end. Then the Civil Rights movement would have been fought on spiritual grounds and the church would have fulfilled Christ's mandate to be salt in a tasteless society and light in that darkness. God visited America in the Azusa Revival in an unlikely place, a former stable. He used unlikely servants including the sons and daughters of slaves. This movement had the full potential of being God's solution to the American dilemma of racism, sexism, and classism.

My thesis is that the leaders of this movement missed a date with divine destiny in Hot Springs. The same opportunity was given by God as had been given to the Protestant reformers and the leaders of the Great Awakening. Their decision to not trust God and to follow their conscience resulted in great social, spiritual and economic changes in the whole society. I believe there was the potential for the healing of the wounds of the Civil War, the years of slavery and the potential for the demonstration of God's power for forgiveness and reconciliation. Let your sanctified imagination soar for a minute. Imagine what could have been. The Klan would not have had the support of White Christians. There would have been no need for the emergence of the Black Muslim group. The energy of the Civil Rights Movement could have been focused upon evangelism, education and economic development. Just let your sanctified imagination continue to soar. There would have been no letter from the Birmingham Jail. No assassination of Martin Luther King. No final sermon, "I've been to the mountaintop," delivered at the national headquarters of the Church of God in Christ Mason Temple. There seems to be an historical connection between a bad decision by spiritual leaders in Hot Springs in 1914 and

the fifty-four years of segregation and suffering that culminated in the death of Martin Luther King in Memphis, Tennessee in 1968.

Those who met in Hot Springs were undoubtedly good men, saved men, but they did nothing to correct the evils which prevented brothers and sisters from worshipping and serving their God together. Edmond Burke once said, "that the only prerequisite for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." Jesus had left clear instructions, "I made you one. I brought you together, stay together." But a decision in Hot Springs was made to deny the mandate of Christ and to go separate ways based upon skin color and ethnicity. May God help us to obey scripture rather than listen to the directions of culture. May God help us to stay together.

While it is true that the Pentecostal/Holiness Leaders who had experienced the Miracle of Azusa missed the opportunity to lead our nation in the Godly resolution of the American dilemma of racism, it may be that God will give another opportunity to experience this transforming and unifying power of the Holy Spirit. The acknowledged leader of this great revival was a black man, W. J. Seymour, the son of a slave. Other sons and daughters of slaves participated equally with sons and daughters of slave owners and confirmed segregationists. For a few years (during the period from 1906-1914), Pentecostal Holiness believers from many ethnic backgrounds in the United States believed and saw many miracles of salvations, healing, deliverance from demon possession, etc., as well as the "the washing away of the color line in the blood of Jesus." What God had started was hindered by a carnal and unfortunate decision to "conform to culture," rather than to affirm unity in the family of God and to suffer if necessary.

It may be that the Miracle of Memphis in 1994 - when the leaders of several Pentecostal/Holiness denominations met, confessed, repented, washed each other's feet and pledged to be reconciled was a signal that we are to revisit Azusa and complete the unfinished business of racial reconciliation.

Another important development in this process was the formation of the Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches of North America with its integrated shared leadership and its focus on basic Pentecostal/Holiness doctrine and racial reconciliation.

Now it is time to prayerfully consider the next step to realize the vision of unity and justice which was only beginning when it was aborted in 1914. The following recommendations are respectfully submitted to the Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches of North America: Call for the praying women and all intercessors for a fresh move of God in our day. Affirm and re-establish throughout all of our churches the observance of the Annual Feast of Pentecost as a major Holy day. The leadership of denominations could call for three days of fasting and prayer leading up to Pentecost Sunday. Further, in every city where there are representative churches, there could be a joint service in a local civic auditorium. It would be an annual celebration in every community to worship, preach, witness salvation and miracles

that will largely enhance the local Pentecostal/Holiness witness and demonstrate unity. Establish or appoint a commission of theologians, scholars and pastors to report on the impact of the Miracle of Memphis on participating denominations, (what has happened since 1994?). Enter into covenant to mutually recognize ordination of elders and pastors. Call for historical, theological and ethical papers to be presented at each Annual Convocation. These papers would be edited and published. Through this process mature writers and scholars would be encouraged and new talent would be discovered. Initiate an effort to include representation from participating denominations on all college, university and seminary boards with the intent of sharing resources. Recruit and provide scholarships, when appropriate, to minority students to colleges and seminaries. Wherever possible engage in joint ventures in foreign and domestic missions and evangelism, for example in the United States there could be developed a national and local strategy to address the problem of homelessness, hunger AIDS and justice (social, economic and environmental). To always remain open for fresh ideas from heaven so that a healthy balance of word and spirit will save us from the extremes of cold formalism or hot fanaticism.

May God help up to redeem the time, because the days are evil, Ephesians 5: 16.

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A Note About the Author – Bishop George D. McKinney

Bishop George D. McKinney was born August 9, 1932 in Jonesboro, Arkansas. He is a Magna Cum Laude graduate of Arkansas State College where he received a BA degree. Bishop McKinney received his MA degree from Oberlin College, School of Theology in Glendale, CA and received an honorary D.D. from Geneva College in Beaver Falls, PA.

Bishop McKinney is the pastor of St. Stephen's Church of God in Christ. He and his wife, Jean, are also the founders of the St. Stephen's Nursery School, Southeast Counseling and Consulting Services, American Urban University and the St. Stephens Retirement Center, which are all located in San Diego.

Since 1985, Bishop McKinney has served as the Jurisdictional Prelate of the Southern California Second Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction of the C.O.G.I.C. In November 2001, he was elevated to the General Board (the presidium) of the Church of God in Christ, Inc. A former probation officer and is a renowned licensed Marriage, Family and Child Counselor, Bishop McKinney is internationally known for his dynamic preaching and teaching ministry, which places him in constant demand as a conference and convention speaker.

Bishop McKinney is the author of numerous books. He served as the senior editor for the African-American Devotional Bible, published by Zondervan in April 1977. Currently, he serves as publisher for the San Diego Monitor Newspaper. His literary contributions now include the best-selling book, *Cross the Line: Reclaiming the Inner City for God*, whom he co-authored with William Kritlow in 1998.

He has received numerous honors in the fields of religion and community service. In 1995, the San Diego Rotary Club named Bishop McKinney, "Mr. San Diego." On March 7, 2001, the National Assn. of Evangelicals (NAE), presented Bishop McKinney with a Racial Reconciliation Man of the Year Award in recognition of all the work he has done for many years in the area of racial unity.

Bishop McKinney has been happily married to Jean Brown McKinney for 44 years. They are the proud parents of 5 sons and the grandparents of 13.