Azusa Street revival: Historiography of Pentecostalism

by Edith Blumhofer in the March 7, 2006 issue

On April 9, 1906, at a prayer meeting in a modest home on Bonnie Brae Street in Los Angeles, a few men and women spoke in tongues. They had been meeting to pray for “an outpouring” of the Holy Spirit. The tongues speech convinced them that they had “broken through.”

News of the event spread rapidly among blacks, Latinos and whites, the prosperous and the poor, immigrants and natives. Those who yearned for revival, as well as the curious, thronged the house. The need for space prompted a move to an abandoned Methodist church on Azusa Street.

For the next two years, waves of religious enthusiasm waxed and waned at Azusa Street, attracting visitors from across the nation and missionaries from around the globe. The faithful announced that this was a reenactment of the New Testament Day of Pentecost: “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability” (Acts 2:4). God was restoring New Testament experiences of the Holy Spirit—or, as devotees of the movement put it, restoring the apostolic faith.

At Azusa Street, one could see and hear the “utterance gifts” listed in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10. Seekers spent hours praying to be baptized with the Holy Spirit, an experience they expected would be attested by speaking in tongues. People interpreted tongues and prophesied—phenomena with which few Christians had any direct experience. The sick came for healing.

Why were such things happening on an out-of-the-way city street? The faithful had a simple answer: the end of the world loomed, and God was sending the Holy Spirit to equip his chosen people for one last burst of evangelism before it was too late. The baptism with the Holy Spirit was an end-times “enduement with power for service” that went hand in hand with personal holiness. The visible gifts of the Holy Spirit testified to the Spirit’s immediate presence in and among believers.

A century later, Pentecostal denominations boast over 10 million members in the U.S. If one adds those in other churches who embrace Pentecostal-like beliefs and practices, the number more than doubles. Estimates in 2005 of the worldwide number of Pentecostals suggest that there are over 580 million adherents, making Pentecostals the second largest group of Christians in the world, trailing only Roman Catholics. Even those who challenge these numbers agree that by any measure Pentecostal Christianity has experienced dramatic growth. Directly and indirectly, the Azusa Street revival influenced this expansion.

Azusa Street stands at the core of the Pentecostal myth of origins. In recent years scholars have stressed that global Pentecostalism has multiple origins, and that the Azusa Street revival was one of several impulses that birthed a distinctly Pentecostal form of Christianity. In some places the Welsh Revival of 1904-1905 played the role that Azusa Street filled in North America. The Korean revival of 1907, the Indian revivals reaching back into the 19th century, and some indigenous African movements are watersheds in non-Western Pentecostal narratives. Yet, for a variety of reasons, Azusa Street has gained the most visibility, especially in Western renderings of Pentecostal history. And perhaps justifiably so: its immediate global impact, its widely circulated publications, and its networking role kept people aware of its message. Even if Azusa Street was not the only source of the global Pentecostal impulse, it had a vital role in shaping the contours of worldwide Pentecostalism.

What happened at Azusa Street? At the center of this “new thing” stood an African-American preacher named William Seymour. The son of slaves, Seymour had traveled to Los Angeles from Texas to share what he had learned from a self-made preacher named Charles Fox Parham.

During the 1890s, Parham had heard much talk about the baptism with the Holy Spirit, but he observed a lack of consensus on the evidence for this baptism. In 1901, Parham began to preach that the “Bible evidence” of the baptism with the Holy Spirit was speaking in tongues. He called his message the Apostolic Faith. In 1903, thanks to a healing and local revival in eastern Kansas, Parham’s Apostolic Faith began attracting followers. By 1905 his work had reached the Houston area, where he met Seymour. Parham encouraged Seymour to accept an invitation to preach in Los Angeles.

The Azusa Street mission, then, had direct antecedents in Parham's modest midwestern efforts. The core of Parham's message prospered briefly in Seymour's hands. For a few years, the Azusa Street mission became the best-known hub of a movement framed by premillennialist views, influenced by a Wesleyan fervor for holiness and committed to the practice of the spiritual gifts enumerated in 1 Corinthians 12. For a time at least, whites, blacks, Latinos and Native Americans mingled at the mission, though interracial acceptance was at best imperfect and soon broken.

In the fall of 1906, Seymour and an associate, a white woman named Clara Lum, began chronicling the revival in a periodical called *Apostolic Faith*. It quickly became evident that the Azusa Street revival resonated with widely scattered people in part because it seemed hauntingly familiar. Azusa Street gave them context for their own religious experiences and networked them with those who shared their radical evangelical instincts.

In time new denominations influenced by Azusa Street blended the distinctive Apostolic Faith focus on the experience of the Holy Spirit with traditional evangelical tenets. Before World War I, the Church of God in Christ, the Assemblies of God, the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee), the Pentecostal Holiness Church and a host of smaller associations—English-speaking and immigrant—had woven the message associated with Azusa Street into a fabric of belief and practice. In the 1920s, Aimee Semple McPherson's new International Church of the Foursquare Gospel was poised to reinvigorate Los Angeles Pentecostalism. By then, internal disunity had prompted the formation of a cluster of Pentecostal denominations (Anglo, African American and Latino) that denied the Trinity—for example, the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, the forerunner of the United Pentecostal Church, and many Apostolic movements—while sharing the Apostolic Faith heritage. A host of more recent independent associations, charismatic fellowships and nondenominational megachurches also draw inspiration from versions of the Azusa Street narrative.

The Azusa Street revival had global reach through *Apostolic Faith*, the popular religious press, missionary correspondence and personal ambassadors who, emboldened by their religious experiences, traveled the globe to announce firsthand the revival's urgent message of spiritual empowerment in the last days. In time, career missionaries supported by Pentecostal denominations planted the revival's message in remote places around the globe.

The centrality of Azusa Street in the story of Pentecostalism is due in large part to the work of the revival's tireless promoter Frank Bartleman. A restless maverick driven from place to place by his determination to be part of whatever God was doing in the world, Bartleman singlehandedly turned the Azusa Street revival into a literary event of global magnitude by chronicling his impressions and assigning them meaning in a widely circulated book, *How Pentecost Came to Los Angeles*. In this 1925 publication, Bartleman made a case for the centrality of "old Azusa" for Pentecostal identity: "Wales was but intended as the cradle for this worldwide restoration of the power of God. India but the Nazareth where he was 'brought up.'" What really mattered was Azusa Street. American Pentecostals and many scholars have since often been content to take his word for it, glimpsing Azusa Street through Bartleman's eyes instead of rigorously examining the revival's extent and limits.

Azusa Street has had a profound place in collective Pentecostal memory. Its imaginative power shapes not only narrative but also practice and makes the historiography of Pentecostalism surprisingly contentious because adherents generally embrace a particular version of the revival's story and often engage parts of its legacy rather the whole. The Apostolic Faith Mission no longer stands on Azusa Street, but a century after the mission opened its doors (and in some ways now more than ever) the Azusa Street revival in one way or another frames the identities of millions of Pentecostal Christians.