

Let the Walls Come Down: William J. Seymour

William J. Seymour's impact on Christianity has been grossly underestimated. His ministry gave birth to the Pentecostal movement, which has grown to 410 million members today, enjoying the fastest growth rate of any major religious grouping at 20 million new members a year.¹ Disturbingly, though influential white Christian leaders have been recognized by the American Evangelical community, Seymour, an African-American, has been largely overlooked, even though his emphasis on racial reconciliation, holy living and the power of the Holy Spirit are lessons desperately needed to be learned in our modern day.

In preparation for revival

On May 2, 1870, William J. Seymour was born in Centerville, Louisiana, the son of two freed slaves. Though he received little or no early formal education, he taught himself to read and write. In his early years, he set himself to studying the Bible, and he soaked in the spirituality of Black Christians from the deep South.

When he was twenty-five, he boarded a train for Indianapolis. While there, he did not attend the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church that enjoyed the strongest black congregation in Indianapolis. Instead, Seymour chose a church located seven blocks further from his home, which

¹ Cox, xv; Patrick Johnstone, *Operation World: The Day-by-Day Guide To Praying For the World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993, p. 23.

was affiliated with the more interracial Methodist Episcopal denomination. This decision is claimed to be the “first clear indication he gave of seeking interracial reconciliation.”²

In 1900, Seymour moved to Cincinnati, where he eventually ended up with a local movement called the Evening Light Saints, which was later known as the Church of God Reformation Movement. The movement’s emphasis, as given by the founder’s successor, E. E. Byrum, was “Christian holiness in preparation for the rapidly approaching end of history, divine healing, and the need to forsake denominationalism in favor of the one true ‘church of God.’”³ His emphasis on holiness would later cause a person to remark:

[Seymour] really lived what we had been preaching for years, a sanctified life. It was the wonderful character of this man whom God has chosen that attracted the people to keep coming to this humble meeting [Azusa Street Mission].”⁴

In 1903, he left for Houston as an evangelist. He later accepted an interim pastorate position in the place of Rev. Mrs. Lucy F. Farrow, an African-American pastor, who was in Kansas as a governess for evangelist Charles F. Parham. When Rev. Farrow returned, she explained how she had spoken in “unknown tongues” in the Parham home, and that this should be experienced by every Christian. Seymour learned more about this phenomenon by sitting outside of Parham’s classroom, listening through a door left carefully ajar because Jim Crow laws kept him from learning with white students. Here, Seymour learned about *glossolalia*, though he himself did not receive it at that time.

While Seymour was the interim pastor, Mrs. Neely Terry had visited Houston and was impressed with his pastoral and godly demeanor. Therefore, when her black holiness church needed a pastor in 1906, she convinced her church to invite Seymour, sending train fare along as well. Seymour, sensing this as a call from God, left for Los Angeles in January 1906.

² Nelson, 161.

³ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 200.

God's instrument of revival

When he arrived in Los Angeles, he began preaching immediately to his eager congregation at nightly meetings. However, his preaching that *glossolalia* could be a part of every believer's experience had him locked out the church on his fifth night. Seymour, without shelter or income, moved into the home of Edward Lee and his wife, and began a solitary fasting and praying vigil.

A month later, in response to popular demand, a meeting was held between Seymour and other holiness leaders to settle this issue, where President Roberts of the Southern California Holiness Association was surprisingly persuaded to Seymour's viewpoint. After these meetings, Richard and Ruth Asbery invited Seymour to stay at their home, and they began regular prayer meetings during February and March.

On Monday, April 9, Lee asked Seymour to come over and pray for a recovery from his illness so that he could attend the evening meeting. After prayer, Lee felt better immediately, and with further prayer, Lee started uttering in tongues. Both Lee and Seymour were ecstatic.

That night, they went to their prayer meeting, where Seymour opened with the text from Acts 2:4, "And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." After he gave a testimony of Lee's experience, *glossolalia* started to pour out from Lee's mouth, electrifying everyone. All of them were swept to their feet, and at least seven started to speak in strange tongues.⁵ This was the beginning of the Pentecostal movement.

The news about this event spread, and crowds began to gather. As more and more were being touched by the power of the Holy Spirit, Seymour and others had truly believed that the outpouring of Pentecost was being restored to the church as God's sign for the end of the age.⁶

⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 191.

Seymour himself uttered in tongues three days later, while praying fervently side-by-side with a European-American man.

As their meetings grew, they needed a larger place to meet, and leased an old church at 312 Azusa Street. It was here, at the Azusa Street Mission, that people from many races, nationalities, and classes gathered. In a time of tumultuous racial prejudice, Seymour desired more than anything that people of all races would be welcomed and enjoined together as one church before God, writing, “No instrument that God can use is rejected on account of color or dress or lack of education. This is why God has built up the work [at Azusa].”⁷ Even the walls of gender were being broken down, where women were included with full equality in worship, releasing their talents and leadership.⁸

Great fruit was being wrought for Christ from 1906-1908 at Azusa. Services began three times a day, every day, and the crowds were piled up with 750-800 inside and 400-500 more outside, with visitors coming throughout the day.⁹ By January 1908, 25 missionaries had been to Liberia, South and North China, and Japan. People came from all over the world to attend the Azusa meetings. It was a glorious time for Seymour and the church.

Not everyone accepted the work at Azusa as an awesome work of God. Many were appalled by the signs and wonders, others were appalled by the interracial fellowship. But, the movement had begun, and would later change the lives of millions and millions.

The decay of a dream

But, these good times would not last for Seymour. Three major events wrenched the Pentecostal movement from his influence. In October 1906, Parham, seeking to claim his “rightful” leadership

⁷ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 196.

in this burgeoning movement, came to Azusa and was repulsed by the display of interracial fellowship. Parham took the pulpit, and started his rebuke with “God is sick at his stomach!”¹⁰ Parham’s decision to separate from Azusa undermined Seymour’s position and seriously weakened the movement.¹¹

In 1911, a second trauma would definitively end Seymour’s influence in this movement. While Seymour was away on a cross-country preaching mission, William Durham secured permission to preach at Azusa, stirring controversy. He decried against Seymour’s Wesleyan view and upheld a “finished work” model.¹² Though a legitimate concern, his polemic style caused much strife, polarization, and division. He also believed that glossolalia is the only sign or evidence of Spirit baptism, against Seymour’s belief that tongues was not the only sign.¹³

Seymour returned from his preaching mission to deal with the issue, and eventually he was forced to lock Durham out of the mission. Durham then proceeded to begin a rival ministry, attracting 600 members away from Azusa. He essentially formed a white-dominated movement with a heavy emphasis on glossolalia, which wrenched the movement from Seymour’s primary concern of the unity of the body of Christ, regardless of race. The Pentecostal movement, which had numerically more whites, had itself “separated along racial lines and forgot Seymour.”¹⁴

He continued to pastor at the Azusa Street Mission until his death, which remained interracial until the end. He died of a heart attack on September 28, 1922. His followers say that he died of a broken heart.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹² In Seymour’s Wesleyan model, sanctification was a second experience of grace after conversion. In the “finished work” model, both sanctification and conversion occurred at the same time.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 271.

He had a dream, that people of all colors would worship together, under the power of the Holy Spirit, during a time period where racial hatred and strife was at peaking. He spent his life seeking this dream, and he would not relinquish this dream, even unto the end. Unfortunately, many of the inheritors of his legacy have steered the course of the Pentecostal movement away from his original dream, but Seymour himself should be remembered as the pioneer of this powerful movement.

Bibliography

- Connelly, James T. "William J. Seymour." *Twentieth-Century Shapers of American Popular Religion*. Edited by Charles H. Lippy. New York: Greenwood Press, 1989. Pp. 381-387. A short, encyclopedia-like treatment of Seymour's life, with a brief and somewhat unfair appraisal of his work. The work includes a brief critical analysis of biographies to date.
- Cox, Harvey. *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1995. Pp. 45-65. An excellent, compelling narrative, in describing the events in Seymour's life at Azusa.
- Goff, James R. Jr. *Fields White Unto Harvest: Charles F. Parham and the Missionary Origins of Pentecostalism*. Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1988. Pp. 9-10, 107-109, 111-120, 128-131. This work is understandably spare in its treatment of Seymour. He rejects Seymour as the founder of the Pentecostal movements in favor of Parham, claiming that glossolalia should be the definitive aspect of Pentecostalism.
- McRobert, Iain. *The Black Roots and White Racism of Early Pentecostalism in the USA*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988. Pp. 48-59. A succinct biography, though heavily dependent on Nelson's work when describing Seymour's life.
- _____. "The Black Roots of Pentecostalism." *Pentecost, Mission and Ecumenism: Essays on Intercultural Theology*. Edited by Jan A. B. Jongeneel. New York: Peter Lang, 1992. Pp. 73-84. McRobert lambasts the lack of recognition for Seymour's role in the Pentecostal movement, arguing that the African culture has influenced the movement. Again, the author borrows heavily from Nelson's account.
- Nelson, Douglas J. "For Such a Time as This: The Story of Bishop William J. Seymour and the Azusa Street Revival: A Search for Pentecostal/Charismatic Roots." Ph. D. dissertation, University of Birmingham, England, 1981. The best, most carefully researched biography of Seymour. It includes critical analyses of past primary and secondary biographies, and the author thoughtfully weaves in historical and social issues contemporaneous with Seymour's life.
- Robeck, Cecil M. Jr. "Pentecostal Origins From a Global Perspective." *All Together in One Place: Theological Papers from the Brighton Conference on World Evangelization*. Edited by Harold D. Hunter and Peter D. Hocken. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd., 1993. Pp. 166-180. Delivers a well-written argument for Seymour's more prominent role in the origins of the Pentecostal movement.
- Tinney, James S. "William J. Seymour: Father of Modern-Day Pentecostalism." *Black Apostles: Afro-American Clergy Confront the Twentieth Century*. Edited by Randall K. Burkett and Richard Newman. Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1978. Pp. 213- 225. A cumbersome, outdated account arguing for greater recognition of Seymour's accomplishments.

Note: Was unable to locate Seymour's one major work, *The Doctrines and Disciplines of the Azusa Street Apostolic Faith Mission of Los Angeles, Cal., with Scripture Readings by W. J. Seymour, Its Founder and General Overseer*.

William J. Seymour's life and ministry Implications for today's ministry

What is most striking is his desire to break down walls of race, gender, and socio-economic class. Though recent movement such as the Promise Keepers have begun anew to break down these walls, it has been said that Sunday morning at 11 o'clock is still the most segregated time in America. I am personally challenged, as I serve both at an ethnic-specific college ministry and a multi-ethnic church, and am forced to examine my involvement with the ethnic-specific ministry in light of Seymour's work.

Secondly, he was a man of prayer. All of what had happened at Azusa almost a century ago was grounded in prayer. It was his time of solitary praying and fasting that brought about the beginnings of the prayer meetings. It was other times of prayer and fasting that allowed the power of the Holy Spirit to come. Through his heart of praying, he allowed the movement of God to pour itself out at Azusa.

Lastly, his character was impeccable. He was seen as a pastor to all, without fault or reproach, no doubt in part due to his background with the holiness movement. Even when betrayed by his own colleagues, he showed a great deal of humility, dignity, and pursued to be like Christ in what he did. And, in his humility, he did not limit the work of God. He allowed the movement of the Holy Spirit to lead, and did not presume to know more about God than God himself. It was this humility that allowed the Spirit of God to fall on Azusa and to touch the lives of many, eventually to peoples all throughout the world.