



Pentecostal Founders
- William Seymour

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Although Charles Parham is generally considered to be the founder of the Pentecostal movement,(1) his student, William Seymour, is often cited as the founder of most Pentecostal churches. From the church that Seymour founded at Azusa Street, Los Angeles, came almost all the Pentecostal denominations today.

Ministry and Life

William Joseph Seymour (1870-1922) was born into an African-American family from emancipated slaves. As a child Seymour was raised in Louisiana as a Roman Catholic, but often attended a Baptist church at Centerfield whilst still remaining a Catholic. At age 21 his father died and William became the family provider, working on their farm growing enough food to live near the poverty line.

In 1895 he moved to Indianapolis where he attended various churches, but more prominently a Methodist Episcopal church. He now claimed to be a Born Again Christian. He was greatly influenced by the Holiness Movement of the times, especially Daniel Warner's 'Evening Light Saints' group. This group had distinctive beliefs including faith healing, foot washing, the imminent Second Coming of Christ, and 'separation from the world' in beliefs, lifestyle and dress.

In 1900 Seymour returned to Louisiana working on a farm, before moving to Cincinnati in 1901 where he worked as a waiter. He attended a Bible school founded by holiness preacher Martin Knapp. Knapp taught personal 'revelations' in dreams and visions and that Jesus would return prior to a literal millennium (Pre-Millennialism). Seymour then contracted smallpox and became blind in one eye. He saw this as a result of his slowness to 'answer Gods call to ministry'.

Seymour would be greatly influenced by Charles Parham and his Bible school in Topeka, Kansas. Parham himself had been influenced by extremists in the holiness movement, in particular a John Dowie. (2)

At the end of December 1900 Parham had urged his students to study Acts 2 for 'evidences' to 'receive the Holy Spirit', (this being something more than the Holy Spirit given at salvation). After days of prayer and worship they were gathered together on December 31st

and again late the next evening January 1st, 1901. A student, Agnus Ozeman, requested prayer to 'receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit'. She began to speak in what they believed was the gift of 'tongues'.

At first some assumed Ozeman spoke in a Chinese language. Others left the group and wrote scathing reports of the bizarre manifestations of the students. Ozeman was a 30 year old unmarried 'holiness enthusiast' known for going from one holiness camp to another seeking the mystical and sensational. Parham brought in a linguist to ascertain the language but it was determined to be not any real language but rather ecstatic utterances.

In 1903 Seymour moved to Houston and in the winter of 1904-1905 he claimed to receive a 'special revelation' from a 'well-known coloured clergyman' (believed to be Charles Price Jones with Charles Harrison Mason, founders of what would become the *Church of God in Christ*).

For a period of some months Seymour studied with Parham's school (which had dissolved in Topeka and restarted in Houston). Seymour then received an invitation to pastor a holiness mission in Los Angeles founded by Julia Hutchins, who intended to be a missionary to Liberia. Although Parham considered Seymour 'unqualified' because he had not yet been 'baptized in the Holy Spirit' (ie. receiving the 'tongues' as 'evidence'), Seymour continued to Los Angeles anyway.

In February 1906 Seymour preached at Julia's church. Seymour taught the Parhamite doctrine - that speaking in tongues was the evidence of having received the Holy Spirit, even though Seymour *had not experienced it himself*. Julia Hutchins and J. M. Roberts, president of the Southern California Holiness Association, rejected Seymour's position as contrary to Holiness views. They padlocked the doors to prevent him from returning. They called Seymour to a meeting and asked Seymour questions about his doctrine. Although they expressed some interest in his view of the 'Baptism With the Spirit' experience, they banned him from preaching in Holiness churches in the area.

The Holiness Movement, although considered by some theologians to have extremes, it primarily held to the 'Baptism with the Spirit' and 'Sanctification' as being synonymous. However,

various preachers began teaching *levels of sanctification* which invariably led to a 'crisis' point in 'sanctification' - being a 'Baptism with the Spirit' as a *subsequent* experience. Parham and others further added to that - 'tongues' as the 'evidence' of this experience.

Seymour stayed with a friend, Edward Lee, and started a prayer meeting at his house. When it grew too large for the house, they moved to another house owned by African American, Richard Asberry. Seymour enlisted two friends in Houston, Lucy Farrow and Joseph Warren to help. The group of 15 African Americans and five children grew into a larger group, with a Baptist Frank Bartleman also joining, (Bartleman would later publish detailed accounts of Seymour's Azusa Street church 'revival').

In the same year (1906) Seymour prayed they would experience the 'evidence' as taught by Parham. Edward Lee was the first to speak in 'tongues' after having hands laid on him. Before the evening was finished several others also received the experience. Three days later Seymour himself spoke in 'tongues'.

The crowd was now so large that a front porch collapsed and they had to seek a venue to hold meetings. The venue was 312 Azusa St. and the church was to be known as the *Azusa Street Mission* (incorporated with the '*Apostolic Faith mission*').

Both men and women preached (Pentecostals were the first to have women pastors and preachers). Pastors went to Azusa St. to receive and take their experiences home to other churches.

The revival quickly grew with crowds of up to 1,000. Meetings for a while ran seven days a week. Well-known names in the early Pentecostal movement such as Parham, Lake, Bosworth, Hezmalhalch and many others attended the 'revival' and took what they had experienced back to their own churches.

Seymour became increasingly concerned about extremes of '*spiritualistic manifestations, hypnotic forces, fleshly contortions*' and lack of order in the assembly. (3) He requested Parham come and assess the situation. When Parham came to Azusa St. the lack of evidence of 'xenoglossalia' (known foreign languages) was by now an embarrassment. (Parham held to 'tongues' as being real languages, as at Acts 2:6-11).

Parham renounced Azusa St. for their ‘babbling’ and their coercing of such sounds. He found ‘*hypnotic influences, familiar spirit influences, spiritualistic influences, mesmeric influences and all kinds of spells and spasms, falling in trances, etc. All of these things are foreign to and unknown [to his ‘Apostolic Faith movement’] outside of Los Angeles, except in the places visited by the workers sent out from this city*’. (4)

Seymour broke with Parham who was asked to leave. Parham later further denounced the movement as a case of ‘*awful fits and spasms*’, (5) of ‘*holy rollers and hypnotists*’, (6) ‘*a freak imitation of Pentecost. Horrible awful shame!*’. (7)

Parham’s accounts were backed by newspaper reports. The *Los Angeles Times*, wrote scathing accounts of manifestations and immorality. (8) Respected theologians who visited, such as Dr. Campbell Morgan, R.A. Torrey, H. A. Ironside, Clarence Larkin and W.B.Godbey, denounced the demonic and immoral things seen and heard. (9) Yet many modern day accounts of the Azusa St. ‘revival’ have re-written, exaggerated and ignored the accounts of the fleshly or demonic manifestations, as well as the infidelity, immorality and disorder.

The church was shut down in 1911. But by then other cities had planted churches modelled after Azusa St. Pentecostal groups such as the *Assemblies of God* (founded 1912), the *Church of God*, the *Pentecostal Holiness church*, the *Foursquare Gospel*, the *United Pentecostal church*, all trace their roots to the 1906 Azusa St. ‘Revival’ in Los Angeles, pastored by William Seymour.

From Azusa St. came the first Pentecostal missionaries to be scattered throughout the world. William Durham (1873-1912) took the experience to Chicago, then to Italy. He was renowned for supposedly interpreting ‘messages in tongues’ and publishing them. In Italy the experience spread to Brazil. Francisco Olazabal and other Mexicans took the experience to Latin America. Amanda Smith and Minnie Adams took it to India. (10)

However, after a few years in various places it was realised that the ‘tongues’ were not the zenoglossalia (foreign languages) enabling the missionaries to preach the Gospel in lands where they needed the language. A report in 1909 by a missionary who examined the results in three mission fields reported the devastating consequences

of this inability and the discouraged faiths when people realised the deception of what was really a counterfeit of Acts 2. (11)

There was also for many years a mixed understanding of what was 'tongues', since the first consensus by Parham was that tongues would be *known foreign languages*. For example, in India the tongues were recognised to be unknown and ecstatic. From such confusion there was developed the idea of an alternate 'private tongues' to 'edify self' and 'angelic' tongues - tongues that were not necessarily *known foreign languages*. Today this confusion is evident with many who would defend the lack of real known *languages* and *dialects* (as in Acts 2:6,8 - Greek 'dialektos' for 'tongues'). The so called unknown tongues were simply taught as 'angelic' or 'heavenly' languages.

The deception was not made easier when in 1907 Parham himself, the founder of this Pentecostal 'Apostolic Faith' movement, was arrested for homosexual acts with a 22 year old man in San Antonio, Texas. (12) The case was not prosecuted for lack of enough evidence. But from then unto his death he was considered a fallen prophet by many.

Seymour's attempt to develop what Parham had founded also now ran into power struggles. Prominent figures such as William Durham, Florence Crawford and others, having various doctrinal differences, wrote against William Seymour causing his influence to decline. There were to be serious divisions with the doctrines of sanctification and the 'Baptism with the Spirit with tongues'. By 1912 the Pentecostal movement in Los Angeles and other places was divided. (13)

In 1908 Seymour married a Jennie Moore. Seymour's secretary, Clara Lum, did not agree with the marriage and had already sided with Seymour's detractors. Lum was editing the *Apostolic Faith* newsletter for Seymour. She resigned and took with her the newsletter mailing list, joining forces with Florence Crawford. (14)

The loss of the newspaper helped to diminish the Azusa St. 'Revival'. By 1914 the Azusa St. church had shrunk to a small group of American blacks. Seymour continued to pastor until 1922 when he suffered two heart attacks and died in his wife's arms. (15) His wife died in 1936.

Doctrine

Most Pentecostal pastors today do not realise that Seymour, the leader of the Azusa St. movement, would ‘*ultimately repudiate the initial evidence teaching* (speaking in tongues)’. (16) He also rejected the use of tongues for evangelism, contrary to Parham who developed the tongues doctrine at Topeka to be used for preaching the Gospel on mission fields.

Parham rejected the ecstatic utterance as a counterfeit of real biblical tongues (‘zenoglossalia’). Yet today ecstatic utterances is the very experience of Pentecostal churches! Seymour also rejected Parham’s doctrine of annihilation in Hell, rather than eternal punishment.

The seedbed for this new teaching of the *Baptism With the Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues* is clearly traced to the late 1800’s Holiness Movement. There was a slow but steady progression away from the orthodox teaching on sanctification - ie. a *continuous* life long inward work of the Spirit *conforming one to the image of Christ* (Rom:8:29) and *continuously filling* the believer upon salvation (Eph.5:18). Then in seeking holiness and to eradicate sin many sought a *crisis point* of sanctification. This led to *second states or stages* of sanctification, and for some even a heretical ‘entire sanctification’ (sinless perfection). Much of this *laid the foundation for the distinctive Pentecostal doctrine* to come and to be propagated by Parham in 1901 and then Seymour at Azusa Street in 1906, and thereafter worldwide.

The unknown tongues of today are linked to Parham at Topeka and Seymour at Azusa St., Los Angeles. Yet these tongues of today as ecstatic utterances clearly contradict the three biblical cases of speaking in tongues being *known foreign languages*. Even the Greek words used for tongues (‘*glosse*’ and ‘*dialektos*’) show clearly with their usage, that they refer to languages, dialects, *known* speech.

Conclusion

All major American Pentecostal denominations can be traced to the Azusa Street, including the *Assemblies of God* (1912), the *Church of God in Christ*, the *Pentecostal Assemblies of the World*, the *United Pentecostal Church*, and the *Pentecostal Holiness Church*. (17)

William Seymour as a student of Charles Parham's new doctrine was the pioneer of the modern Pentecostal churches. Over just a few decades previously, subtle additions were made to the orthodox view of sanctification as a continuous life long work of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Experiences from the Holiness movement, Parham's school, and Azusa St., trumped the old orthodox 'faith once delivered'. The new 'baptism' doctrines were experiential and spectacular. Sadly these new teachings which were at first denounced as demonic or heretical are now adopted as the norm in a fast growing Pentecostal movement worldwide.

History is a great teacher if we care to examine the fruit and its roots. Yet the history of the foundations of the Pentecostal movement continues to be *rewritten*. The founders and the pioneers are portrayed as apostolic miracle workers greatly used by God. However, almost all of these Pentecostal pioneers ended as false prophets, false teachers, charlatans and prolific exaggerators or liars. (18)

The biggest tragedy of all is that with these new doctrines, the extra-biblical, the personal revelations and the experiential, have led to even more unbiblical extremes in recent times with new 'healing' and 'prosperity' gospels. The simple soul saving Gospel of Christ crucified has been added to, or worse, buried in counterfeits of what was truly and clearly defined by the apostles on the day of Pentecost.

- (1) <https://taministries.net/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Pentecostal-Founders-Charles-Parham-v2.6.pdf>
- (2) <https://taministries.net/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Pentecostal-Founders-John-Dowie-v2.6-1.pdf>
- (3) *The Birth of a Lie*, K. Napier www.christiandoctrine.net
- (4) *Life*, Parham P.168,169
- (5) *The Holiness Pentecostal Movement in the United States*, Vinson Synan, P.112
- (6) *The Life of Charles Parham*, Sarah Parham P.168
- (7) *Apostolic Faith* Charles Parham, 1912
- (8) The *Los Angeles Times* (April 18th.1906) <https://taministries.net/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Pentecostal-Founders-Charles-Parham-v2.6.pdf>
- (9) Quotes and references in <https://taministries.net/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Pentecostal-Founders-Charles-Parham-v2.6.pdf>
- (10) IBID above
- (11) IBID above
- (12) *Fields White Unto Harvest* James Goff P.106,136
- (13) Espinosa, Gaston (2014) *William J. Seymour and the Origins of Global Pentecostalism: A Biography and Documentary History*
- (14) Robeck, Cecil M (2006) *The Azusa Street Mission And Revival: The Birth Of The Global Pentecostal Movement*
- (15) Espinosa, Gaston (2014) *William J. Seymour and the Origins of Global Pentecostalism: A Biography and Documentary History*
- (16) Synan & Fox 2012, *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*
- (17) Robeck, Cecil M (2006) *The Azusa Street Mission And Revival: The Birth Of The Global Pentecostal Movement*
- (18) See ‘*Pentecostal Founders and Pioneers*’ series on website taministries.net

Notes

About the Author and the Ministry

Terry Arnold holds a Doctorate in Theology (Dth), a Masters degree (MABS) and several diplomas. He was founder and president of *South Pacific Bible Institute*, a Bible college training and equipping people for ministry. In addition he was the founder of Hervey Bay Bible Church in Queensland, Australia. He has for 25 years served as an elder and then pastor.

Terry is the author of several books and is involved in a full time ministry of *teaching, informing* and *equipping* the church. He is also editor of a growing worldwide publication '*Diakrisis (Australia)*'.

His ministry includes preaching/teaching and conducting seminars and conferences in a wide range of churches and colleges.

TA Ministries is a non-denominational and non-profit faith ministry founded in 1989 when the book '*To Catholics Whom I Love*' was written by Terry Arnold. This book went through several re-prints and served as a fruitful outreach to Roman Catholics.

In 1996 the ministry became a full-time operation with the introduction of a free newsletter, later named '*Diakrisis (Australia)*'.

Diakrisis is published bi-monthly to *teach, inform* and *equip* the church of Biblical truths and to warn of false teaching. It has also been a valuable reference aid to hundreds of pastors/elders.