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HOW THE AZUSA STREET REVIVAL FORTIFIED RACISM

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The first decade of the twentieth century witnessed a profound movement from Los Angeles that would end up significantly affecting Christianity on a global scale for the next century and beyond. In 1906, the small street of Azusa became the home of the Azusa Street Revival, marking the beginning of American Pentecostalism–Christianity’s largest and fastest growing denomination. In addition to its contribution to Christian spirituality, the Azusa street revival became well known for its remarkable disintegration of racial barriers in the midst of the diverse but segregated Los Angeles city. During the revival meetings, there was an unprecedented unifying of Whites, Blacks, and Latinos together in a single building for a single purpose, a spectacle that was received with surprise, welcome, and even distaste as it was witnessed in the midst of one the lowest points of race relations in America (Ayers 2007, 407).

Three glorious years of revival meetings spawned thousands of converts, churches, and other Pentecostal movements worldwide. While most remember the glories that came forth from those meetings, few can recall that the end of those three years were actually mired with factions, dissension, and anger. By the last few months of the movement, every controversy stemmed from the source the original founders had originally wished to see demolished–racism (Sanders 2003, 112-120). Many agree that the Azusa Street Revival made major strides in regards to racial unity and reconciliation, but in the course of the long run, few understand how this great event actually contributed and further fed to the festering hatred that existed between the different races and ethnicities.

In fact, despite what some have honored concerning its efforts in ethnic integration, the Azusa Street Revival was not a success in racial unity and integration. While the beginnings and middle of the movement looked promising, its bitter crash at the end resulting from issues of race would signal one thing–that whatever happened there was a failed experiment. Secular newspapers smeared the meetings (Hunter 1993, 170) as the movement changed from one which saw no color lines to one where the color lines was even more tightly policed (Sanders 2003, 114). The movement began with meetings in one building, but would experience multiple splits, almost unanimously between lines of color, resulting in racially homogenous meetings in different buildings (Hollenweger 1997, 20).

Charles Parham, controversially acclaimed to be one of the revival’s founders, visited one of these multi-ethnic meetings and rudely denounced it, lambasting “bucks niggers” and calling it a “freak imitation of Pentecost” and an “awful shame” (Robeck 2006, 181). Mainline churches would also hear of the integration, the fact that this great movement constituted of mostly those of low economic class, and criticize the Pentecostal movement and its adherents for their “lowly black origins” (Hollenweger 1997, 20). The pressure mounting from outside and from within the movement would eventually lead Pentecostalism as a denomination as one of the most segregated (but growing) denominations (Hayford 2006, 108).

This segregation, however, was not very blatant. Rather, the seeds of racial disunity were often colored and covered under the banner of theological disagreement, making the undertones of the racial segregation less apparent. Japie Lapoorta, in researching Azusa history, determined that there were three major successions in the end of the Azusa Street Revival (Hunter 1993, 181-185). Two of them dealt with theological disagreements between participants, but all three of them involved issues of race. Indeed, these were all initially seen as responses to doctrinal crisis at the time, but in both cases, the end result of the debacle was the white participants leaving and starting their own congregation.

The first involved Charles Parham, aforementioned above. He visited the Mission from Topeka, Kansas with his teaching that speaking in tongues was the Bible evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. His visits to the revival meetings in 1907 were not welcomed by Seymour and subsequently, a fallout occurred. The fallout that resulted, however, was not divided on theological lines, but on color lines. Parham went on to establish a small, competing congregation blocks from the revival, consisting of only white members (Hunter 1993, 178).

The second was credited to William Durham, a minister from Chicago, who preached his “finished work doctrine” to the Mission. His teaching on issues regarding the Holy Spirit and sanctification drew crowds but were rejected by Seymour, and was prohibited from preaching at the Azusa Mission. And in similar fashion as the Parham incident, he left the revival to start his own mission with a large group of white participants. Only this time, he would take the last remaining white participant in these revival meetings, leaving the Azusa Street Mission completely in the hands of African American members (Sanders 2003, 116). The result of these divisions was separate revival meetings now categorized by race.

As both of these issues demonstrated, what seemed to be a divide over theological issues was actually manifested racially. The Azusa street revival began as a movement which sought to combat racism visibly, but the nature of these divisions which dismantled the movement showed that racism was still alive and well, only now that it was being justified and covered on theological grounds. Theology had served to become a blanket which hid the cruel reality beneath.

Furthermore, what had resulted was that the Azusa Street Revival was more than the hiding of the racial tensions under theological banners. The organizations that formed from these divisions would serve as stronghold structures which would continue to house these racial tensions. C. de Wet, Pentecostal missiologist observed that while the Spirit helped to sweep away color lines, once the revival was over, and the initial enthusiasm makes way for organizations, all the old prejudices come back (ibid, 44).

Indeed, the Pentecostal churches that spawned from the revival in the decades to come became sharply segregated into black and white churches (Hollenweger 1997, 20). By virtue of their birth the churches became in themselves new systems of injustice, as racism would continue to thrive being safely housed in the aegis of the local church.

And from these churches, racism would not only survive, but would take new forms and activities. The leaders that formed these racially divided Pentecostal churches were often involved in racist activities, inviting society to accept racism as norm within both church and society (Hollenweger 1997, 44). From Charles Parham’s new church, he would continue to propagate his Anglo-Israel theories, holding the white people to be the supreme and blessed race on the earth (Sanders 2003, 48). A statement from the Assemblies of God, a denomination which spawned from the revivals, made a statement that there were “true Christians in the Ku Klux Klan”, a white-supremacist organization of hate (Hollenweger 1997, 45).

In fact, the Assemblies of God became one of the fruits of the Azusa Street Revival that held and propagated racism for decades after the revival. It was formed with the intention of unifying the factions that resulted from the movement, but it had ultimately failed as the group went onto to become a predominantly all-white congregation (Sanders 2003, 117), and would institutionalize its racist tendencies as their actions dictated and assumed that “one race is inherently superior to the other races” (Newman 2007, 3).

Their leadership would fail to address issues of race, being recorded for making comments towards African American Pentecostals as “uneducated and simple-minded” in their denominational magazine in 1919 (Newman 2008, 10). In addition, they refused black ministers, perpetuated stories of the Azusa Street Revival with a white supremacist tint, and would until 1958 deem racially integrated churches as unable to reach the lost (ibid 8-10). Outside the Assemblies of God, other white Pentecostal churches who have links with Blacks would be known to subjugate those Black churches through financial means (Hunter 1993, 183).

The Azusa Street Revival is remembered for many great things. However, when put into play with its sociological implications, we can see that this move of God was still colored by human weaknesses and failures. The Pentecostal churches that birthed from the movement would eventually flourish and develop on a worldwide scale (Hollenweger 1997, 21), but would remain segregated as issues of race would plague churches in America for decades to come. Needless to say, racism did not only survive the Azusa Street Revival, it found new mediums and forms through the products of the revival to grow and to be fortified. We applaud the spiritual impact that the Azusa Street Revival made on Christianity in the twentieth century, but it is also an unfortunate story of a movement that began with such great promise in regards to racial unity and reconciliation to finish as one which contributed to the very problem it sought to eliminate despite its best intentions.

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