

# Lessons From the Past: What Our History Teaches Us

by William W. Menzies

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*William W. Menzies reflects on the historical significance and foundational values of the Assemblies of God, emphasizing the importance of evangelism and doctrinal integrity for the future.*

**Scripture:** Mark 16:15, Acts 2:4, 1 Corinthians 12:4, 1 Corinthians 14:26, Ephesians 4:3, 1 Thessalonians 5:19, 2 Timothy 3:16, James 1:17, 1 Peter 1:15, Jude 1:3

**Topics:** "Church History", "Pentecostal Revival"

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## Description

William W. Menzies preaches about the birth of the Assemblies of God in revival, emphasizing evangelism, church planting, and missions as high priorities since its inception in 1914. The Pentecostal revival, marked by engaging in pioneer endeavors at home and abroad, is attributed to being in tune with the Spirit and anchored in the authority of Scriptures. The Assemblies of God, part of the larger Pentecostal world revival, was guided by wise leaders like E.N. Bell and J. Roswell Flower, ensuring it stayed true to biblical principles amidst challenges. The sermon reflects on the unique characteristics of early Pentecostals, highlighting their expectancy of Christ's return, reality of God's presence, emphasis on holy living, evangelistic zeal, faith in God's provision, and commitment to biblical authority.

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## Transcript

The Assemblies of God was born in revival. Evangelism, church planting, and missions have been high priorities since our Fellowship began in 1914. People led of the Spirit have been engaging in pioneer endeavors at home and abroad. Flowing with the Spirit, being in the right place at the right time with the right words and ministries is the genius of the Pentecostal revival.

As the first Pentecostal century comes to a conclusion, it is appropriate to reflect on our history. Consider some elements in the history of the Assemblies of God. Perhaps pondering these will enhance your own perspective.

Since the Apostolic Age, historians have catalogued at least two dozen renewal movements in the Church that have exhibited Pentecostal or charismatic experiences. Until the 20th century, none of these movements survived long enough to make a lasting impression on the Church. The modern Pentecostal revival appears to be the first renewal movement since the Early Church that has survived and has become a significant force in Christianity.

## A UNIQUE REVIVAL MOVEMENT

The Assemblies of God is only part of the larger Pentecostal world revival. But the steady influence of wise leaders in the early history of the Assemblies of God is a major reason why this revival did not fall prey to the fanaticisms and heresies that destroyed previous movements. Leaders such as E.N. Bell, J. Roswell Flower, T.K. Leonard, and D.W. Kerr insisted on the authority of the Scriptures as the standard for evaluating all spiritual experiences. Commitment to the authority of the Bible was the principal reason the early Pentecostal movement survived.

While it is important to see the uniqueness of the Pentecostal revival, it is equally important to acknowledge with humility that this Fellowship owes much to a host of godly people and great awakenings in days past. Donald Gee, a great statesman of the first generation of Pentecostals, emphasized that the modern Pentecostal revival added no new doctrine to the mainstream of orthodox theology; it was simply calling the Church back to its roots. Few, if any, of the creeds of orthodox Christianity deny Pentecostal values. In fact, we have been great borrowers. Our polity and much of our Statement of Fundamental Truths came from the Christian and Missionary Alliance, a strong evangelical body that provided many of our early Assemblies of God leaders.

## WE OWE MUCH TO OTHERS

It is important that we recognize we belong in the mainstream of Christian orthodoxy. It is arrogant to assume that God did a totally new thing in the modern Pentecostal outpouring. The immediate context of the Pentecostal revival is the 19th-century holiness revival that grew out of the Wesleyan movement. We owe much to the early Fundamentalist movement, as well. Fundamentalist scholars and revivalists provided the biblical and theological resources our pastors and leaders employed. We also borrowed some of their methodologies, such as the Bible institute as a training instrument for emerging leadership.

## WHY WAS THE ASSEMBLIES OF GOD FORMED

Some scholars believe the origin of the modern Pentecostal movement was New Year's day, 1901, in Charles Parham's Topeka, Kansas, Bethel Bible College. While there were isolated episodes of outpourings of the Holy Spirit well before this time, in Topeka, the theological identity of the modern Pentecostal movement was established.

Parham and his disciples taught that believers should expect a baptism in the Holy Spirit, separate from new birth. This baptism in the Holy Spirit is accompanied by the initial, physical sign of speaking in other tongues, according to Acts 2:4. This teaching had been ignored for centuries among the Christian churches

From 1901 until 1914, when the Assemblies of God was formed, churches and missions grew in virtual isolation--from recognized denominations and from one another. A variety of problems experienced among these full-gospel assemblies precipitated a call for a general conference of churches and believers to consider ways of unifying the work and dealing with common problems. The first General Council, held in April 1914, in Hot Springs, Arkansas, was to address five key issues: 1) Agreement in doctrine; 2) Conservation of the work; 3) Facilitating foreign missions; 4) Chartering churches in accordance with the law; 5) Proposing the formation of a Bible Training School for the training of young people.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EARLY ASSEMBLIES OF GOD

Many current members of Assemblies of God churches are third- or fourth-generation Pentecostals. Others have come into the Fellowship as new converts and may not have an understanding of our foundational generation. Over the years, the qualities and values that gave birth to a revival movement are easily forgotten. The history of other revival bodies discloses that it is possible for a movement to evolve into something far removed from the vision and passion of the founding generation. Groups that champion the priority of spiritual experience are more vulnerable to erratic and rapid theological drift than are others who are more cognitively oriented.

Apostolic Faith Mission on Azusa Street in Los Angeles.

#### WHAT WERE SOME OF THE COMMON CHARACTERISTICS THAT MARKED THE EARLY PENTECOSTALS?

a.Expectancy. Early Pentecostals had a sense of urgency about the second coming of Christ. The term "latter rain"--the promised outpouring of the Spirit just before the return of the Lord--was used to describe the Pentecostal revival. Fundamentalist-premillennial eschatology was the way this earnest hope was articulated. The belief that Jesus was coming soon energized Pentecostals to mobilize for reaching the lost before the day of opportunity was gone

b.Reality. First-generation Pentecostals experienced the presence of God in powerful ways. Working people gathered the family at the end of a hard day and walked great distances to a revival meeting. Why? They did not want to miss God's presence. These believers had entered into a new relationship with God that was meaningful and filled with power. Donald Gee explained that the baptism in the Holy Spirit "made the Lord Jesus intensely real."

c.Holy Living. Pentecostals of that generation wanted to do nothing to hinder the flow of the Spirit. These saints abhorred "compromise with the world." They defined worldliness in terms appropriate to the contemporary culture. Their zeal to live carefully sometimes took extreme forms, and when some codified what they interpreted as proper behavior, it appeared to later believers as legalistic. For that first generation, however, the decisions they made were born out of an authentic desire to please God by thought, word, and deed. Why? They had come into the very presence of a holy God.

d.Evangelistic Zeal. From the very outset of the Pentecostal revival, the Holy Spirit impressed upon Spirit-filled believers the high priority of reaching the lost for Christ. Although Pentecostals were eager to share their understanding of the baptism in the Spirit with non-Pentecostal Christians, their primary focus was on reaching the unsaved, at home and abroad. In fact, much of the evangelism being successfully undertaken was the work of Pentecostal missionaries and workers. Foreign missionaries from various nations visited Azusa Street in Los Angeles well before the formation of the Assemblies of God. Some of these were baptized in the Spirit and returned to their respective fields as Pentecostal missionaries. When the Assemblies of God was formed, a significant number of these Pentecostal missionaries chose to identify with the newly formed Fellowship.

e.Faith. It was common for assemblies in that first generation to not take any offerings. After all, they were living by faith. These people were intent on trusting God for all facets of life, including financial needs. If God burdened individuals about the need of a neighboring community that lacked a full-gospel witness, a "gospel band," or just a family, would move to that place expecting to start a congregation. Often, in these pioneer situations, the key to unlocking the hearts was a remarkable healing. God was so real He could meet any need. Life for early Pentecostals was a daily holy adventure.

f. Equality. That God is no respecter of persons is evident from the days of Azusa Street. William J. Seymour, the black holiness minister from Texas, served as the moderator. Vinson Synan, in his Ph.D. dissertation, demonstrated that in the "Jim Crow" era of American sociology, the early Pentecostal movement was the most conspicuous forum in which blacks and whites associated.

It is remarkable that there is no specific founder for the modern Pentecostal revival. One might cite Parham or Seymour, but in truth there were Pentecostal outpourings around the world in the first decade of the century, virtually simultaneously, and with no single human leader. God appears to have employed a wide variety of people, from all walks of life, to be the emissaries of this new revival movement. Not many noble, not many wealthy, not many of high social influence were the instruments God chose--that no flesh should glory.

g. Biblical Authority. The modern Pentecostal revival, like other revivals in the past, could have fallen into the abuse of overemphasis on spectacular phenomena that accompany revivals. The baptism in the Spirit and the manifestations of the gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12,14) are experiential in nature. Such experiences were defining characteristics of the revival. The Assemblies of God avoided the pitfalls of extremism and unbalanced emphases because of an early commitment to the authority of the Bible as the all-sufficient rule for faith and practice.

Continual recourse to the Scriptures by the leadership of the Fellowship and by the teachers and writers in our schools and churches has kept the Assemblies of God from following fads and aberrations. A tribute to our Fellowship is the formation and nurturing of quality schools for training young people for the ministry and for the various vocations of life. A balance has been achieved by encouraging strong colleges, universities, and a seminary that adhere firmly to the authority of Scripture.

h. Controversy. No denomination is without problems. How a fellowship addresses problems is a clue to its survival. One of the reasons for the formation of the Assemblies of God was to provide a standard of doctrine on which the body of believers could agree, and to which ministers could be held accountable. In the 1980s, the fall of Assemblies of God televangelists Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker exposed the dangers inherent in ministries lacking proper accountability. The forthright, yet compassionate, response of Assemblies of God leadership to these serious moral problems gained considerable respect for the integrity of our Fellowship.

i. Doctrinal Issues. Over the years, several major doctrinal issues have recurred, in one form or another. Some have been resolved; others continue to resurface with new questions.

Jesus Only (Oneness). When the Assemblies of God was just 1 year old, an enthusiasm, beginning in California, swept the Fellowship. Soon the new teaching--that to be truly biblical, one had to be baptized in water in the name of Jesus only--spread through the Fellowship. Many leaders in the Assemblies of God were swept along with this teaching. J. Roswell Flower, one of the young leaders, recognized from his study of church history that this was not a new revelation, but was the reincarnation of an old heresy.

The Jesus Only teaching was unmasked as Sabellianism, or Modal Monarchianism--a heresy about the Godhead that had been condemned by the Church in the fourth century. Pastors and leaders reviewed the admonition of Brother Flower in the light of Scripture and swiftly rejected the Jesus Only fascination

Delegates at the first General Council in 1914 had heralded their belief in the authority of the Bible, but chose not to spell out what this meant for them in concrete ways to avoid the appearance of advocating a

creed. But 2 years later, the delegates recognized they had to respond to a doctrinal crisis with a statement of shared beliefs. The Jesus Only controversy led the Fellowship to adopt a Statement of Fundamental Truths in 1916. This solved the problem decisively.

Initial Physical Evidence. In 1918, F.F. Bosworth, an Assemblies of God minister, wrote a tract titled, Do All Speak With Tongues? Bosworth rejected the widely held teaching of the Assemblies of God that the biblical standard for the baptism in the Spirit is the accompanying sign of speaking in other tongues. For him it was optional. Since he chose to make an issue of this by distributing his tract at conferences and camps, it was necessary for the Fellowship to act. At the General Council of 1918, the historic doctrine was strongly reaffirmed and Bosworth chose to leave the Fellowship.

With the onset of charismatic renewal in the mid-1950s, people in virtually every Christian denomination have become interested in the person and work of the Holy Spirit. With this came a wide range of theological opinions regarding the baptism in the Holy Spirit.

Many charismatics believe in the gifts of the Spirit, but are vague about the baptism in the Spirit, particularly the teaching that tongues is the accompanying sign. The wide range of teaching about the work of the Spirit has in more recent years called for fresh articulation of the traditional Pentecostal teaching to avoid confusion. Future generations of Pentecostal ministers and laypersons will be best served by encouraging vigorous biblical and theological inquiry. Only by persuasive biblical teaching will theological continuity be maintained.

Wise Words From the

Lips of J.W. Welch

As Christ lives in you, He dethrones the self-life.

Justification is a condition before God as though you had never sinned.

Don't let the sun go down on any hard feeling in the heart against anyone.

There is a difference between trusting the Lord and deeming Him trustworthy.

Beware of exercising your influence as a spiritual leader in a partial way.

In every body of believers there should be all the gifts of the Spirit.

Beware of revelations and manifestations that are not given to other Spirit-filled people.

The best method of correcting wrong conditions is to teach right conditions and to live right.

It is a desperate thing for one who has been filled with the Holy Ghost to backslide.

The Baptism does not restore a backslider, nor speaking in tongues; only the Blood restores to fellowship with God.

The Scriptures are not to be argued about, but believed. Never argue.

Paul did not depend upon oratory to present Christ, but used ordinary language and depended upon the demonstration and power of the Spirit to make his message effectual.

The "Latter Rain" controversy. In 1947, in Saskatchewan, a new teaching surfaced that spread quickly, especially to the American Northwest and Central states. Adherents to this teaching focused on the laying on of hands to bestow gifts, including the gift of foreign languages for missionary service. Added to this were personal prophecies to dispense personal guidance. These emphases produced division and consternation. Decisive action by Assemblies of God leaders stemmed the hysteria, and by 1951, the movement had subsided.

Charismatic Issues. In the 1950s, with the advent of the charismatic renewal, a new set of relationships was thrust on Pentecostals. Churchmen in the liberal wing of Christianity, especially those associated with the World Council of Churches, began to earnestly inquire about the work of the Holy Spirit. In 1967, an even more astounding development took place--Roman Catholics were receiving the baptism in the Holy Spirit. These outpourings in liberal Protestant settings and among Roman Catholics put traditional Pentecostal bodies like the Assemblies of God in an awkward posture. Our evangelical friends discountenanced association with liberals and with Catholics, yet among these people there appeared to be a greater openness to the work of the Spirit. The charismatic renewal is, without doubt, a genuine work of the Holy Spirit.

As in most historic revivals, there have been problems around the edges. Since the 1960s, a succession of extreme teachings has plagued the church. The shepherding movement led to abuses of leadership and brought the victims of this teaching into bondage. This was exposed as a misunderstanding of the Great Shepherd passage, John 10. Another fascination was demon possession among believers. Paul's teaching in Romans and Galatians about the deliverance and freedom available to all believers dispelled this unhealthy emphasis. Exaggerated expectations regarding faith produced a litany of divisive teachings, such as "name it/claim it theology," associated with an unqualified endorsement of material prosperity and a consequent muting of sacrificial living, and Kingdom Now teaching that emphasized an unwarranted triumphalism regarding the taking of nations for God.

Over the years, the leadership of the Assemblies of God has dealt with these and other issues. The leadership authorized more than a dozen pamphlets, commonly referred to as position papers, to reflect what is commonly taught and believed in our Fellowship on issues that have unsettled earnest believers.

## Conclusion

As we pause at the end of the first Pentecostal century, it is important to address the future. How can the cherished values of the Pentecostal revival be preserved? How can the Assemblies of God keep on course in reaching the world for Christ in the new millennium? Are there some challenges that appear to be of great current consequence?

Doctrinal stability. The Pentecostal revival has emphasized the urgency of a profound spiritual experience, a genuine encounter with God. We have emphasized the necessity of a new birth. In addition, the baptism in the Holy Spirit, as an empowering experience, has long been the distinguishing doctrinal characteristic of our Fellowship. We are also people of the Word. We must continue to judge all subjective experiences by the teaching of the revealed Word of God, the Bible.

The priority of evangelism and missions. From the beginning of the Pentecostal movement, reaching the lost of this world for Christ was the central passion. Early leaders recognized that the baptism in the Holy Spirit was an empowering for witness--not merely an experience for personal enjoyment. Creative ways of penetrating the cultures of this world for Christ should continue to be high on the agenda for the future

Matching "doing" with concern for "being." The baptism in the Holy Spirit is not a mark of superior holiness; the anointing of the Spirit is a call to holiness. There is peril in allowing the values of prevailing culture to dominate in subtle ways the lifestyles of modern Pentecostals. Every generation must be confronted with fresh ways of defining what it means to be "separate from the world." There is a great need for fresh writing and preaching about sanctification.

In the recent phase of revival within the Assemblies of God, the Spirit seems to be highlighting the need for righteous living. How can Assemblies of God preachers and teachers encourage deeper consecration and purity of life? Will Pentecostals of the new millennium be known for their piety--or merely for their power?

Mature Engagement. An unfinished item on the agenda is the uncertain relationship of the Pentecostal movement to the charismatic movement and to the evangelical world. Pentecostals will be required to define their role in new ways. Certainly Pentecostals are evangelicals, but the unique contribution of Pentecostal understanding needs to be articulated freshly so Pentecostal values are not submerged within evangelical teaching. Pentecostals will also need to develop constructive ways to relate to charismatics, without compromising the authority of Scripture and the importance of historic doctrines of faith.

Mature and honest relationships require a clear understanding, not only of those with whom we dialogue, but a clear self-understanding, as well. The tide of history has thrust the Assemblies of God into necessary contact with a wide array of Christian bodies. We cannot operate in isolation. The invitation to dialogue offers great doors of challenge and opportunity for constructive influence in the new millennium.

As we approach unknown tomorrows, let us be encouraged. We cannot guarantee the future; that is in God's hands. We do, however, have a responsibility for conserving our goodly heritage, rendering faithful stewardship over the choices that have been entrusted to us.

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