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The Full Gospel Revisited

For those of us in the Pentecostal tradition, April 2006 is the month in which we remember the most storied of our birthplaces, the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles. The reality is the spiritual awakening that has birthed a global movement has multiple and non-connected points of origin. Historians are having a hey-day "dialoguing" over where our movement really began and the less investigative crowd settles for an opportunity to just celebrate and act like we've arrived because we are having a centennial celebration.

I identify myself with humble thanks to God as a Pentecostal. I have been to those hallowed spots in downtown Los Angeles and I have seen the spiritual flames that still burn brightly around the world in places that God is now touching. I have mixed feelings as I reflect about this centennial. I rejoice at what God has done and want to understand as best I can what the incipient nature of my tradition really was. But I am wondering out loud about some overlooked items that need reintroduction on our spiritual radar screens.

One of the early ways to describe the spiritual outpouring that occurred a century ago was to talk about the Full Gospel. I suppose one could say such a descriptor is presumptuous, as if the term *Gospel* needs a modifier of any kind. However, the *Full Gospel* simply was a

The *Prez Release* is a monthly commentary from the President of the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary. If you want to be removed from this mailing list or would like to update your email address, please contact sstarkey@agts.edu.

way these early pioneers described their new and vital relationship with God. The fullness of what the Gospel meant was now tangible in concrete ways like healings, miracles, spiritual gifts and radically changed lives. The cerebral had become the concrete and it brought radical change in participants' lives.

I spent the better part of this spring exploring another side of the Azusa Street story and that is the composition of the folks that attended the Azusa Street episode. Clearly this was a church that ran counter to the separate worlds of existence that the U.S., in general, and Los Angeles, in particular, were experiencing in that early part of the 20th century. The early news reports of the events of the Azusa Street awakening are rife with pejorative descriptions and critical characterizations of the participants. The fact that multiple immigrant groups were represented, that blacks were in leadership and women served beside men in the forefront of this incipient religious paradigm shift is met with the poor investigation and shallow understanding that 100 years later still typifies the media and religion.

I can only imagine the sheer wonder of William J. Seymour as to what was going on in front of him. The simple son of slaves who God sovereignly used to orchestrate the proceedings of spiritual awakening in this humble "cathedral" must have wondered if what he was observing was really true. Not only were the miraculous dimensions of the book of Acts being reenacted in front of eyes, but also a compelling zeal for the missionary enterprise connected to the renewal of spiritual empowerment was being demonstrated regularly. It is understandable why the term Full Gospel might be employed as a descriptor of revitalization and the getting back to the basics of the Bible that this movement represented. These dual elements of the legacy of Azusa Street (i.e. the miraculous and the empowered missionary service) have long been the heritage I have been nurtured on and value deeply.

But I keep reading the descriptors of those early services at the Azusa Street and get a picture of another miraculous demonstration of God's power. This "miraculous sign" is the reconciliation of people who have been taught to avoid and even hate one another, now experiencing life-changing spiritual encounters together in this humble place. They are unsure of what's really going on, but they cannot deny that its origin is divine and that it is creating a new kind of community rarely seen in that day and still an exception to the rule 100 years later.

The term *Full Gospel* need not be a curious descriptor of an incipient revivalist movement or the presumptive expression of an exuberant, but misguided spirituality. As we reflect upon 100 years of Holy Spirit activity might we not ask if we truly reflect, in our church communities, the fullest of the results of the Gospel's transforming power? Isn't the "house of God" the place that we can put aside all the things that the world has used to separate us (social strata, ethnicity and gender) (See Gal.2:20)? I think William Seymour saw a glimpse of that expression of the Full Gospel in the vast differences between people in the Azusa Street mission. He was amazed at what God could do. In fact, he had never seen such a picture of the Gospel. Yet there it was for the entire world to see. I'm not naïve, I know the radical experiment of Azusa Street did not last, but it gave us a glimpse of what could happen with the fullness of the Gospel unleashed.

Pentecostal historian David Daniels reminds us that, 50 years after Azusa Street, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed of a similar world of reconciled differences which King called the *great world house*. Dr. King wrote, "We have great problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great world house in which we have to live together, black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Jew and Gentile, Muslim and Hindu, a family unduly separated in ideas, cultures and interest who, because we can never live apart, must learn to live with each other in peace." The night before Dr.

King was assassinated he spoke in Mason Temple, the mother church of the largest Pentecostal group in North America and he spoke of having seen the Promised Land, though he admitted he probably would never get there himself. Like Seymour, I wonder what King saw? What vision of the future drove him and why is it that that vision got him killed?

During this time of celebrating God's goodness, the descriptor FULL GOSPEL needs a fresh hearing. Why? Because we need a fresh display of the fullness of the Gospel. I welcome the miraculous, I will participate in Jesus' mission of redemption that continues to this day by the power of the Holy Spirit, but I long to see the reconciliatory nature of the fullness of the Gospel played out in our disjointed and separated worlds. If we Pentecostals wish to celebrate the book of Acts we need to move with the Spirit from Jerusalem to Antioch. It is at Antioch that the Full Gospel finally plays itself out in the creation of a church where transformed people don't look alike nor come from the same roots. It is that church that Acts 13 records is the model that the Spirit anoints for church planting efforts that will replicate this New Testament version of the "great world house" all over the Mediterranean world.

Call me naïve or call me too ideal, but the Full Gospel has yet to be expressed to the fullest. It is the only *fullness* that can address the hatred and violence of this world and bring together a concrete picture of what it means to be reconciled to God and live a life of reconciliation among humankind. Herbert T. Buffam was a songwriter of the Azusa Street era and wrote a song that is reminiscent of the focused nature of those sons and daughters of Azusa. The resoluteness to swim against popular trends and not be deterred by business as usual is tersely stated in these lyrics, *"I'm going through, I'm going through, I'll pay the price whatever others do. I'll take the way with the Lord's despised few. But I'm going through Jesus, I'm going through!"*

I believe in the Full Gospel...nothing less. I believe the word of the Apostle Paul whose very world was radically overhauled by what he saw the Full Gospel do at Antioch. St. Paul writes in II Corinthians 5:20, "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. Be reconciled to God!" The reconciliation with God that is enfolded in reconciliation with my neighbor is where the Gospel indeed demonstrates the word **Full**.