Pentecost in the Postbox:
Theology, Ecclesiology, and Community in Early Pentecostal Periodicals

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Nascent Pentecostalism was consciously unorganized and eschewed denominational identity, ecclesiastical hierarchy, and even (initially) dogmatic uniformity. As people of the Spirit, the earliest practitioners ostensibly relied upon Paracletic inspiration and spiritual discernment to guide the movement, and treated efforts to organize or even codify “Pentecostalism” with suspicion. In the absence of unified control, the Pentecostal periodical played an important part in the dissemination of the movement’s message and meaning and formed a neural network for the burgeoning movement as many publishers built extensive mailing lists representing a global readership. Without a central church clearinghouse, periodical literature served as the critical mode of communication, offering apologists and adherents some semblance of cohesiveness and prefiguring the formation of some of the earliest Pentecostal organizations. As information vehicles, these papers were seminal in developing theology, ecclesiology, and community among disparate groups of Pentecostal believers around the world.

Pentecostalism must be considered in the context of turn-of-the-century revivalism and utopianism with which it shares a restorationist vision of primitive Christianity. The aetiological narrative of the Pentecostal movement is rooted in the work of Charles Fox Parham, a young Kansas preacher and eclectic theological innovator, who left the Methodist Episcopal Church to pursue a more radical Holiness path outside of denominationalism, which emphasized salvation, healing, sanctification, the Second Coming of Christ, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit (S. Parham, 1985). In the summer of 1900, Charles Parham made pilgrimage to many Bible centers and Christian utopias around the nation but returned to Topeka convinced that he had not found an enterprise that mirrored the apostolic New Testament Church: “... while many had obtained
real experience in sanctification and the anointing that abideth, there still remained a great outpouring of power for the Christians who were to close this age” (S. Parham, 1985, p. 48).

In October 1900, Parham opened Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas and commenced an investigation into the “Bible evidence” Holy Spirit baptism. According to Parham, the students independently concluded that speaking in tongues was the universal proof of the Pentecostal blessing; and on January 1, 1901, Agnes Ozman, a young resident at the school, became the first to receive the glossalalic gift. Her experience was repeated throughout the student body (LaBerge, 1985). This marks the beginning of the modern Pentecostal movement, which embraces Parham’s notion of tongues as “initial evidence” of Spirit baptism.

In 1905, Charles Parham began the first Pentecostal publication, the Apostolic Faith, based in Melrose, Kansas. Extant issues reveal the experiential nature of the Pentecostal faith, and the paper thematically focuses on theology and personal testimony and promotes Parham’s cardinal doctrine of evidential tongues:

The Holy Ghost came on the day of pentecost [sic] and the sign of his incoming, was the speaking in other languages unknown to the one on which he fell . . . We find that to day [sic] when people get to the same place in their consecration . . . that God does give them the same power he gave the apostles on the day of pentecost [sic]. The power of speaking in the languages of the world as the spirit [sic] gives utterance. (C. Parham, 1906, p. 10)

Parham also continually emphasizes divine healing and health as a product of Christ’s atonement. For instance, the August 1905 issue features accounts of supernatural healing coupled with protracted defenses of modern miracles. Of the issue’s 22 articles, 15 (or 68%) concern healing. There are also narrative testimonies such as one from Mary Myers (1905), healed of
blood poisoning and gangrene and another from Ora Harris Childers (1905) healed of consumption after being pronounced terminal. One article, simply titled “Healing” offers an inter-testamental apologetic for the belief in modern miracles. (C. Parham, 1905a).

As bands of Apostolic Faith workers spread throughout Kansas, Missouri, and Texas, the Apostolic Faith formed a connective tissue between the disparate members of the growing body through field reports and advertisements for camp meetings and conferences, including an annual “Grand Encampment of the Apostolic Faith, Holiness, and Full Gospel Movements” held in Baxter Springs, Kansas (“Advert,”1905, p. 14). One letter published from “The Society of brethren of the Apostolic Faith at Melrose and Keelville, Kan.” is addressed with Pauline gusto to “. . . all those who are in Christ and walk not after the flesh” and reports on the progress of the burgeoning churches in the area, testifying to the spread of the “full Gospel” message (Aultman, 1905, p. 9). The issue also contains reports from Galveston, Richmond, Katy, and Houston, Texas. For adherents, the papers assumed an almost apostolic epistolary quality, providing critical information used to strengthen the spiritual formation and fellowship of the group.

Certainly, Parham had an expansive vision of the potential impact of his publication: “This paper is given to all who will appreciate it absolutely free; we have longed for years to preach the Gospel free to all the world; the Lord is now providing the way to accomplish this” (“Publisher’s Note,” 1905, p. 8). The paper was also used as an evangelistic tool to promote local meetings. At an Apostolic Faith reunion in Baxter Springs, Kansas, “On the hill top could be seen workers, all day long, giving away papers, telling of the soon coming of Jesus and praying for the sick” (Parham, 1905b, p. 3).
In September 1906, another publication, also titled the *Apostolic Faith*, was issued from Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles, the accepted epicenter of modern Pentecostal revival, which was initially affiliated with Parham’s movement. The leader of the mission, William Joseph Seymour, the Louisiana-born son of former slaves, encountered Parham’s ministry in Houston, Texas and eventually began the Azusa Street Mission, promoting the “initial evidence” doctrine (Robeck, 2006).

Within weeks of the mission’s opening in April 1906, hundreds were flocking daily to seek the Pentecostal blessing (Nelson, 1981, p. 196). While Azusa likely attracted an audience of curious onlookers through the criticism the mission received in the *Los Angeles Times* and religious periodicals such as *Burning Bush*, which demonized the movement as the product of Satan (Martin, 2006, p. 263), its worldwide popularity was built through the extensive distribution of its official organ, the *Apostolic Faith*.

Only fourteen issues of the broadsheet publication were produced between September 1906 and May 1908; however, Assemblies of God historians Edith Blumhofer and Grant Wacker (2001, p. 15) write: “the *Apostolic Faith* soon turned up in homes, street cars, and mission stations in all parts of the continent and many parts of the world. If any one text spoke for the movement as a whole it was the *Apostolic Faith.*” Certainly, Seymour and his editorial staff, viewed the *Apostolic Faith* as the chief source for information about the mission. According to the inaugural issue:

People from all over the country are sending in letters of inquiry, having heard that Pentecost has come to Los Angeles. Some have come long distances and report that the half had not been told them. Through this paper [the *Apostolic Faith*] we answer
inquiries, as it would be impossible to write to each. Souls are hungry all over the land.

“Good News Spreads,” 1906, p. 2)

And there were continual efforts to expand the mailing list, each recipient a potential convert to the movement: “If you receive a sample copy of this paper and wish it continued, send your name and address . . . and as the Lord permits we will send the paper” (“Sample Copies,” 1906, p. 4). The paper reached a monthly print run of 50,000 by May 1908 (Nelson, 1981, p. 213), and ubiquity implies authority, especially since so many Pentecostal assemblies and organization trace their roots to the Los Angeles meetings.

The *Apostolic Faith* is a sourcebook of early Pentecostal doctrine and practice. While Pentecostal practitioners claimed not to be “comeouters”, proselytizing the parishioners of other churches and denominations, the believers did, in fact, form their own unique belief system and fellowship lines as Azusa became the *de facto* headquarters for the fledgling faith. Through broad dissemination of information, Azusa’s *Apostolic Faith* provided definition and boundaries for an international community and perhaps unwittingly contributed to the structure of the movement and developed a dogmatic and pragmatic core and articulated important distinctives.

*Holiness*

Pentecostalism is an innovation of the radical Wesleyanism of the 19th century Holiness movement, founded on the doctrine of Christian Perfection, or the eradication of humanity’s sinful nature. Like Pentecostalism, the Holiness movement is amorphous, and points of doctrinal emphasis and expression vary. Fundamentally, however, the Holiness soteriological model identifies a bipartite ideal of the Christian experience: justification (conversion) and sanctification (second work of grace), equated with Spirit baptism. Pentecostals reject the synonymity of sanctification and Spirit baptism and introduce a “Third Blessing” for evangelistic
empowerment. However, early Pentecostals do not trivialize sanctification. According to the
*Apostolic Faith*: “There is no difference in quality between the baptism of the Holy Ghost and
sanctification. They are both holiness” (“Baptism of the Holy Ghost,” 1908, p. 4). These
Pentecostals carefully retain the strict Wesleyan chronology of justification and sanctification as
prerequisites of Spirit baptism: “Before you can receive the baptism with the Holy Ghost, you
must have a thorough, definite experience of justification and sanctification . . . ” (“Before you
can” 1907, p.3). The declaration reveals Azusa’s self-identity as an extension of the Holiness
framework and implies a target audience drawn from within the movement. The lexicon is
familiar to those within the Holiness tradition, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit is largely a
logical superimposition.

*Egalitarianism*

The *Apostolic Faith* demonstrates how the Azusa Pentecostals overcame barriers of race,
ethnicity, social class, and gender to create an island of equality in a metropolis constrained by
social mores and prejudices. In June 1906, the *Los Angeles Times* wondered “that any
respectable white person would attend such meetings as are being conducted on Azusa street
[sic]” (“Women with Men Embrace,” 1906, p. 11). According to the *Apostolic Faith*, the
negative exposure only enticed the curious: “The secular papers have been stirred and published
reports against the movement, but it has only resulted in drawing hungry souls . . . “ (“Secular

From its establishment in April 1906, the Azusa Street Mission drew crowds from across the
social strata, including the disenfranchised in mainstream society. The poor, blacks, immigrants,
and women were full participants in the Pentecostal movement in Los Angeles: “God makes no
difference in nationality, Ethiopians, Chinese, Indians, Mexicans and other nationalities worship together” (“Same Old Way,” 1906, p. 3).

The *Apostolic Faith* characterizes the Azusa Street Mission as a veritable “melting pot” of cultures and classes, and the dissemination of the paper ensured the diversity of other missions and ministries which sought to recreate the successes of the Pentecostal outpouring in Los Angeles.

**Xenoglossy:**

Early Pentecostals believed “tongues” to be identifiable foreign languages, unknown to and perfectly articulated by the ecstatic speaker (xenoglossy). Parham believed “that anybody today ought to be able to preach in any language of the world if they had horse sense enough to let God use their tongue and throat” (S. Parham, 1985, p. 52).

Seymour seems to have accepted Parham’s interpretation of the phenomenon, and the *Apostolic Faith* includes several accounts of apparent xenoglossy, in which the glossolist was understood by native speakers. For example, “Sister Anna Hall spoke to the Russians in their church in Los Angeles in their own language as the Spirit gave utterance . . . “ (“Russians hear . . . “, 1906, p.4).

Initially, Pentecostals sometimes viewed xenoglossy as supernatural equipment for foreign missions work: “A brother recently received the gift of the French language . . . He saw a vision of Paris upheaved as it were by a great destruction. The Lord told him to go and preach the Gospel there” (“A brother . . . “, 1907, pg. 2). Though there is little documented success for “missionary tongues”, xenoglossy did fuel missionary fervor among the Azusa faithful.

**Missiology:**

The *Apostolic Faith* was instrumental in the organization and advance of Pentecostal
missionary work. For early Pentecostal believers, the existence of their movement signaled the imminent return of Jesus Christ, and their role in fulfilling Christ’s Great Commission. The paper builds a strong missiological momentum, and money was donated to support the spread of the Pentecostal message.

The first issue of the paper intimates the plans of Spirit-filled missionaries, anxious to carry the Pentecostal blessing to foreign soil. Samuel and Ardella Mead, veteran missionaries of Central Africa, received the Holy Ghost at Azusa and intended to “return to their labor of love” (“From a Missionary to Africa,” 1906, p.3). Thomas Mahler, also en route to Africa, planned to hold Apostolic Faith meetings in Alaska, Russia, Norway, and Germany on his way (“The Lord Sends Him,” 1906, p.4). Lucy Leatherman, Andrew Johnson, and Louise Condit were destined for Jerusalem, and evangelized in several areas before embarking (“Missionaries to Jerusalem,” 1906, p. 4).

As missionaries arrived in the field, the *Apostolic Faith* published reports of their success. One such account, in the penultimate issue of the paper, came from Alfred and Lillian Garr, whose trip was subsidized by the Azusa Mission, where $1200 had been raised within fifteen minutes support their journey (Robeck, 2006, p. 240): “Brother and Sister Garr are in Hong Kong, China last report. God is using them blessedly. A glorious revival is breaking out. Several souls in Hong Kong have received their Pentecost” (“China,” 1908, p.1). Reports were received from such places as Canada, England, Sweden, Ireland, Liberia, Mexico, India, Hawaii, and China. In this way, the *Apostolic Faith* was both a source of critical news and fundraising for missionary work.

Ultimately, it is impossible to fully enumerate the important information contained in the pages of the *Apostolic Faith*. It was a unique publication, which served as a template for other
emerging Pentecostal periodicals. In addition to the Pneumocentric theology and news, the paper effuses the spiritual content demanded by an audience of active seekers and religious pioneers.

Ironically, the importance of the *Apostolic Faith* to the work of the Azusa Mission is revealed in the periodical’s demise. On May 13, 1908, William Seymour married Jennie Evans Moore, the first black woman in Los Angeles to receive the Holy Ghost. In response, Florence Crawford and Clara Lum, co-editors of the *Apostolic Faith*, removed to Oregon, taking with them the critical national and international mailing lists. Lum, instrumental in production of the paper and development of the mailing lists, felt entitled to keep them. According to Nelson, “With the passing of the newspaper from Seymour and Azusa Mission an era ended in Los Angeles” (Nelson, 1981, p. 218). Seymour was unable to continue publication of the broadsheet; and over the next several months, the Azusa Mission reverted to a small church and lost its powerful influence.

As Azusa declined, many emerging Apostolic Faith leaders began to publish papers, and their voices informed the direction of the movement. In fact, over 50 Pentecostal newspapers and periodicals “sprang up” within the first six years of the movement (Nelson, 1981, p. 214), guiding the faithful through doctrinal vicissitudes and promoting greater fellowship in the movement, first through tenuous alliances and ephemeral fellowships and later through the establishment of full-fledged organizations like the Assemblies of God, the Church of God, and the International Pentecostal Holiness Church.

The first significant doctrinal crisis in the Pentecostal movement concerned the “second work” notion of sanctification. William H. Durham, active in the Pentecostal work in Chicago,
was convinced that sanctification occurred at salvation, and published an outright denunciation of a post-conversion crisis in his periodical, *Pentecostal Testimony*:

> How anyone could have been blinded by the theory that sanctification is a definite, second instantaneous work of grace is now a great mystery to me. Of all theories to which men are in bondage, it seems to me this is the weakest as well as the most un-Scriptural [sic], and yet men are contending for it, as if the salvation of the world largely depended upon it. (Durham, 1912a, p. 1)

Durham (1912b, p. 6) dubbed his alternate theory the “Finished Work of Calvary” and hailed the idea as “the most glorious and powerful truth of the Gospel.” Durham’s position was denounced by Charles Parham and William Seymour. However, some influential periodicals did endorse the doctrine, including Eudorus N. Bell’s influential *Word and Witness* and Joseph Roswell Flower’s *Christian Evangel*. In the end, Durham’s message was embraced by the Assemblies of God and has continued to be the dominant doctrinal stance of the largest white Pentecostal denominations.

*Word and Witness* and the *Christian Evangel* were instrumental in strengthening Pentecostal fellowship and later helped articulate the need for Pentecostal organization and consensus. Though both periodicals continued to denounce the trappings of denominationalism, articles acknowledged the functional practicalities of a Spirit-led organization. The prevailing Pentecostal attitude about organization is represented in the balanced argument of missionary W.S. Norwood (1914, p. 6) in the *Christian Evangel*:

> Most Pentecostal saints are rejoicing at the blessed liberation from the trammels of excessive organization in the denominational churches . . . But organization without the
Holy Spirit, and TO MAKE UP FOR His absence, is a very different thing from organization IN the Spirit and BY the Spirit and with the Spirit as President. If organization is according to the Word of the Lord it is necessary, and we must not shun it altogether because it is attended with dangers, even though they be of the gravest kind.

When leaders organized a “General convention of Pentecostal saints and churches of God in Christ” for April 1914, *Word and Witness* addressed rumors in the that the meeting’s sponsors were “going to organize the Churches of God in Christ into man-made churches . . . “ (Goss & Pinson, 1914, p. 2). The article’s authors contend that “a closer affiliation or association” would protect the movement from “fanatics” and “men [of] corrupt character and teaching.” The issue also reprints an article from *Latter Rain Evangel* detailing a problem for unaffiliated foreign missionaries in Africa, who are unable to acquire and “hold property” available to organized missionary societies for free (“A new problem,” 1914, p. 2).

The Hot Springs meeting resulted in the formation of the Assemblies of God, and both Bell and Flower turned their papers over to the Assemblies of God. *Christian Evangel*, later the *Pentecostal Evangel*, was a weekly magazine, and Bell’s *Word and Witness* was a monthly publication (Flower, 1982/83, p. 6). Interestingly, even after the establishment of the Assemblies of God, Flower, in an editorial response to a letter from Archibald P. Collins, repudiated any notion that the General Council intended to unify or exercise power of the affiliate churches:

We [the Presbytery] are fully determined that centralization will not be allowed to present itself in any form, and that as soon as it does, we intend, by the grace of God, to put our feet upon it and stamp it out of existence. (Flower, 1915a, p. 1).
Ironically, Roswell’s *laissez faire* resolve was to be mightily tested by the Trinitarian controversies which irreparably divided the Assemblies of God and polarized the entire Pentecostal movement, transforming many Pentecostal papers into a battleground for doctrinal conformity.

The Trinitarian controversy, which predates the formation of the Assemblies of God, emerged among the “Finished Work” camp of Pentecostals, who convened a World Wide Apostolic Faith Camp Meeting in Arroyo Seco, California in 1913, advertised in *Word and Witness* (“World-Wide Apostolic Faith Camp Meeting,” 1913, p. 1). Following a baptismal sermon by Canadian evangelist, R.E. McAlister, some camp attendees became convinced that the correct baptismal formula was “in the Name of Jesus” rather than the trine invocation.

After nearly a year of study following the encampment, Azusa veteran Frank J. Ewart, began administering baptism in the singular Name of Christ and proclaiming Jesus Christ as the embodiment of the Godhead, vilifying Trinitarianism as post-apostolic apostasy. The doctrine, variously called “Oneness”, “Jesus Only” and the “New Issue”, came to include a tripartite soteriological adaptation based on Acts 2:38, which consisted of repentance, baptism in the Name of Christ, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of glossolalia. The “New Issue” spread quickly through the Pentecostal ranks. Ewart disseminated his doctrinal perspective through his own paper, *Meat in Due Season*. Glenn A. Cook, also a former Azusa elder who had planted Apostolic Faith missions throughout the Midwest and South, accepted rebaptism from Ewart and began visiting missions to proclaim the new doctrine. Many congregations were rebaptized.
The newly-formed Assemblies of God faced a substantial problem as Oneness doctrine took hold in many missions, and the presbytery of the General Council used the *Weekly Evangel* to issue a preliminary statement delaying judgment:

> We stand for everything clearly revealed and set forth in the written Word of God. In so far [sic] as we have seen and understood the Scriptures by the illumination of the Holy Spirit, we are actively propagating the same. In so far [sic] as there is anything in the Scriptures which have not seen as yet, or have neglected, we stand ready to accept and teach this whenever the same is show to be the teaching and practice of the Lord and His apostles (Flower, 1915b, p. 1).

In October 1915, the executive presbytery offered another statement discouraging rebaptism of those who had already been baptized using the Trinitarian formula but affirming:

> That in the case of the individual conscience, each minister or candidate should have the full liberty to be personally baptized with any words he prefers, so long as he stays within the Scriptures on the subject . . . (Bell *et al.*, 1915, p. 4).

Despite the expressed tolerance concerning baptismal invocation, the statement squarely denounces denial of the Trinity; however, within the year, several of the undersigned presbyters, including Howard A. Goss, Daniel C.O. Opperman, H.G. Rodgers, and E.N. Bell were baptized in Jesus’ Name and all but Bell joined the Oneness faction, leaving the Assemblies of God in 1916 with the withdrawal of the Oneness adherents from the fledgling fellowship.

The doctrinal war, which culminated in the permanent division of the movement, was largely waged on the pages of periodicals. As prominent leaders defected from the Trinitarian
faction, Oneness papers formed, joining Ewart’s *Meat in Due Season*. Garfield T. Haywood, the influential Indianapolis pastor, issued *Voice in the Wilderness*, and D.C.O. Opperman published *Blessed Truth*. While Trinitarian papers demonized Oneness adherents as heretics, Oneness papers vilified Trinitarians as “so-called Christians” and the “apostate church” (Cook, G., 1915, p. 2).

One of the primary ecclesiological functions of the Pentecostal papers of this difficult era was to track the doctrinal vicissitudes of leading ministers. One of the most enigmatic cases was the rebaptism of Eudorus N. Bell, General Secretary of the Assemblies of God. Bell authored several articles in the *Word and Witness*, warning readers against the errors of rebaptism. However, while attending an Apostolic Faith camp meeting in August 1915, Bell was immersed in the Name of Jesus Christ. Following this experience, Bell published an article in the *Weekly Evangel* tellingly titled “Who is Jesus Christ? Jesus Christ being exalted as the Jehovah of the Old Testament and the true God of the New. A new realization of Christ as the mighty God.” The article effusively detailed Bell’s deep sense of personal revelation yet nominally affirmed his Trinitarian orthodoxy. Ewart published an ostensibly unexpurgated version of the article in *Meat in Due Season*. Bell remained in the Assemblies of God and received criticism in Opperman’s *Blessed Truth* (1919) for his apparent vacillation in an article titled “Brother Bell Is On Both Sides of the Fence”. Ultimately, any momentary sympathies Bell showed with the Oneness movement faded, and he continued leadership within the Assemblies of God. But periodicals on both sides of the issue were anxious to claim Bell as one of their own.

Issues of Assemblies of God papers regularly reported affirmations of faith by ordained ministers and publicly exposed Oneness converts. In *Word and Witness*, E.N. Bell denied accepting an invitation to Ewart’s Oneness meeting announced in *Meat in Due Season* (Bell,
Archibald Collins declared his Trinitarian faith in monthly issues of *Word and Witness* from August to November of 1915. Though, Assemblies of God missionary Andrew Urshan denied being an “advocator of the ‘new issue’” and affirmed his faith in the “adorable Three-One God” in the *Weekly Evangel* in 1918 (Urshan, 1918, p. 13), the following year Bell authored an announcement on the Oneness defection of missionary Andrew Urshan, grieving his friend’s “new stand.” (1919, p. 9). These announcements helped to define theological boundaries.

Periodicals were critical to the foundation and formation of the early Pentecostal movement. The papers were essential to the organic and pandemic evangelistic model of the movement; and through prolific publication and mass mailing, Pentecost (p)reached around the globe through the printed word transforming Christianity and attracting converts, who, in turn, propagated the message of spiritual renewal implicit in the glos-solalic gift. Through homiletics and testimony, the earliest periodicals both informed and inspired, offering readers apologetics and experience—the theoretical and the practical. As the movement matured and fractured along doctrinal lines, periodicals became catalytic instruments of polarization associated with dogmatic defense. Durham’s *Pentecostal Testimony* preached the “Finished Work at Calvary”; Opperman’s *Blessed Truth* propagated Oneness; Bell’s *Word and Witness* defended Trinitarian orthodoxy. The papers made up the ranks as heterodoxy fragmented the faithful producing sects and schisms. In the decades before instantaneous mass communication, the pages of Pentecostal periodicals provided adherents with definition and demarcation, information and affirmation, identity and community. The informational value of the papers is inestimable. From Topeka to Houston to Los Angeles and beyond, periodicals brought Pentecost to postboxes around the
world and established a new paradigm of experiential spirituality that continues to impact contemporary Christianity.

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