

## **The secrets of the early Pentecostal revival**

In my research over many decades into the history of the early Pentecostal movement I read many eyewitness reports. In time some common truths shared by the eyewitnesses realised in my mind in relation to the Azusa Street Revival.

### **Secret of revival: Spirit-inspired spirit of prayer**

The first was that the revival was preceded by many different individuals who experienced independently from each other a deep burden to pray for the lost, a burden that increased over time to such an extent that some of them spent many nights in prayer before the throne of God. Some people even succeeded in spending all their time in prayer, leaving their employment and trusting God for their daily cares, so convinced were they of the enormous need to pray for the lost. They testified that it was as if time stood still when they started praying, weeping before God for the saving of lost souls. Their burden was for a revival and their lives were literally swallowed up in prayer.

In the course of time, some of these individuals linked up with each and formed prayer groups that gathered exclusively to spend time in prayer for the lost. It is interesting that a similar burden of prayer also accompanied other revivals such as the visitation of the Spirit in Wales in 1904. The spirit of prayer, said Evan Roberts who led the Welsh revival, determined the depth of repentance, and this was the key to every true revival born of God.

In some congregations the spirit of prayer was carried in by some individuals, but it was seldom appreciated. Most members found it easier to criticise those who wanted to pray rather than to pray themselves. For them the church existed to serve their needs, not as a place to seek the face of God. Several early leaders emphasised that this was probably the reason why the eventual revival passed by these churches because their members mostly were seeking selfish blessings and rushed to different meetings to get more of the blessings.

An interesting feature is that those who prayed independently from each other in many cases testified to the same experience. The burden for the lost souls in prayer was to pray for those who would not pray for themselves, confessing their sins for them. Prayers experienced the pains of childbirth for a specific person or family until they experienced in their spirit a victory and the burden for that person left them.

Another feature noted by various eyewitnesses was that any attempts to organise the prayer meetings into a formal structure led to the experience that the Spirit was not satisfied, and the burden did not realise for those present. Only when human programs were set aside, and all attention was fixed on the Spirit interceding for people, did the burden return.

Prayers were also not formal but God-breathed. In many instances, intercessors started by waiting in silence on the Spirit to move before they started praying for those the Spirit lay on their hearts. Then the intercessing came upon them and overwhelmed them and they were gripped with soul travail that nothing could interrupt for as long as it lasted.

In time an alternative view of what worship formed among those who prayed that differed from what they experienced within their own churches when they were led by the Spirit into a new depth of worship. They testified that the Spirit taught them that true worship consisted of what they gave unto God; their focus was not on what they received from it anymore. And true worship only had

one goal, and that was to please God rather than themselves. They also found that too much singing lifted the spirit of worship from them; it was more important to set their hearts on God and wait on Him to manifest His presence.

Something else that several people refer to was that the people inhabiting their world started to act in a different manner. Several relate how they met an acquaintance in friendly manner to find the non-believing person start crying under conviction of their sins. And when they spoke to such persons about their lives, they found a new openness for the gospel. Prayer had paved the way to the hearts of those they prayed for so that the Spirit moved freely. Especially in cases where pray-ers experienced the victory for those persons in their prayers did they notice this openness.

## **Revival**

The revival was introduced on the night of April 9, 1906, on Bonnie Brae Street, when Seymour and seven other people were knocked from their chairs to the floor, as though hit by a bolt of lightning. The other seven men began to speak in tongues and shout out loud praising God. The news quickly spread, the city was stirred and soon crowds gathered so that services had to be moved outside to accommodate the crowds. People fell under the power of God as they approached the meeting. Many were baptized in the Holy Spirit, sick people were healed and many sinners received salvation. To accommodate the crowds, an old dilapidated, two-story frame building at 312 Azusa Street in the industrial section of the city was secured, originally built for an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, had more recently been used as a livery stable, storage building and tenement house.

When San Francisco was hit by an earthquake with an estimated moment magnitude of 7.9 on the Richter scale and a maximum Mercalli intensity of XI (extreme) with high shaking experienced from Eureka on the American north coast to the Salinas Valley on 18 April, 1906 it led to devastating fires in San Francisco that lasted for several days. More than 3,000 people died due to the earthquake, making it the greatest loss of lives from a natural disaster in California's history. The pray-ers experienced the intuition that it was the hand of God moving to call Americans to repentance. The Spirit's outpouring was interpreted as the beginning of the first wave of people turning to God. It is true that many inhabitants of Los Angeles (and the rest of America) were cut to the heart by the San Francisco earthquake, both of which were coastal cities and not far from each other, and people were ready for a spiritual revival.

Many preachers assured the American people that God had nothing to do with earthquakes, to allay the fears of the people. This did not have the necessary effect in many cases and Azusa Street benefited from many fearful people seeking the face of God who visited the meetings with His Spirit.

When the Azusa Street Revival started, the most significant contribution that its leader, William Seymour, made to the worship services was to keep his head in the top one of two shoe boxes in prayer. He did not interrupt the services in any way but kept on praying, encouraging fellow-believers to spend their time together in seeking the face of God.

When the first people were baptised in the Spirit and started speaking in tongues, Seymour was not among them. It only happened at a later stage, when the services had moves to Azusa Street. But that did not deter him from keeping on praying for the revival and the saving of souls.

When the media gave the meetings a bad press, the believers experienced that it was part of God's work and they never criticised the newspapers. Very soon the negative reporting led to even greater crowds satisfying their curiosity and visiting Azusa Street, in many cases to mock and heckle the believers and in several cases, leaving as converted and Spirit-baptised believers.

Azusa Street saw several cases of people, including preachers who tried to hijack the work. Hypnotists attended and tried to apply their art. It seemed that some who served the agenda of Satan also tried to contribute to the services in a negative manner. At times the believers' distinction was not as effective as it should have been. However, eyewitnesses relate that any human effort to steady the work stopped the Spirit from working. Believers had to learn to trust God to take the precious from the vile and to protect the work. The moment too much attention was called to the work of the devil it grieved the Spirit.

### **Emphases at Azusa Street**

Azusa Street was characterised by several emphases. The first was on the blood of Jesus. Although some statements sounded as if magical power was granted to the blood, the general tenor was to emphasise the blood as the only means of being sanctified. A part of the holiness movement taught instant sanctification as an immediate work of the Spirit and interpreted Spirit baptism as such an event. The blood was brought in relation with the high moral standards set at Azusa Street.

Another related emphasis was the emphasis on love. Eyewitnesses told that speaking evil about other people was nearly never heard and when it occurred, the person speaking was immediately reprimanded and rebuffed.

On the wall of the tarrying room where people waited on Spirit baptism a placard prominently informed all people: 'No talking above a whisper'. A thoughtless talker was immediately reprovved. This was holy ground and many people, especially the carnal, gave it a wide berth. Honest seekers sought the Spirit baptism and they really meant business with God. Nobody prayed with them except if they requested it; they came to wait on the Spirit for the manifestation of God that would happen in His time.

No musical instruments were used at Azusa Street, and no need was felt for any accompaniment of singing. All singing happened spontaneously, and no hymn books were used. New people quickly learned the choruses, and familiar and popular hymns were sung. People did not concentrate on words written in a book but worshiped with their eyes closed, many times oblivious to what was happening around them. Singing in tongues occurred also all the time. Later when musical instruments and hymn books were used its effects were interpreted in terms of a quenching of the Spirit.

No platform or pulpit was used, and anyone could participate in the service. When no one did, which happened very frequently, people kept on praying and seeking the face of God. No subjects or sermons were announced ahead of time, and no special speakers were invited. The Spirit ordered the services and it only ended when people realised how late it had become.

Testimonies played a major role and related fresh and real heart-experience. Attendants quickly learned that the shorter a testimony, the better. At times someone who felt anointed by the Spirit started preaching and when attendants experienced that the person had the anointing, they listened intently. If they were of the opinion that the person was not used by the Spirit, they would request the person to go back and rather pray. At times children were also used to preach under the anointing of the Spirit, and women as well, a strange phenomenon at the beginning of the twentieth century before any signs of feminism.

It happened all the time that when someone was preaching the Spirit would fall in all the attendants, people would fall down, and others rushed to the altar to give their hearts to God. No altar call was ever made; all services were, however, marked by people weeping at the altar.

Many testified that they saw a bright light during night times hovering over the building while they were on their way to the services. Others related how they had to stop two or three blocks away to pray for strength before they could continue on their way to the services, so clearly did the anointing rest on what was happening at Azusa Street.

Presumptuous people attended some meetings, especially prejudiced preachers who came to find fault but in most instances their efforts were short-lived. They experienced physical manifestations so that they could not breathe or think properly. Some even lost their sight temporarily and they could not realise what they had intended to do. Many times, these people ended at the altar, weeping and begging God for mercy. The only thing the believers did when they perceived the presence of such people was to pray and watch to see the miracle happening before their eyes.

A heavenly atmosphere pervaded the whole building and one never heard people joking around.

A last remark shared by several eyewitnesses although not all is that when Azusa Street's work became institutionalised the revival lost its vigour. It happened at first that a sign was put up outside the building, announcing the name of the revival movement – 'Apostolic Faith Mission'. Next an organisation was established with leaders. Next the group lost something of the spirit of prayer and services became more formalised.

It was accompanied by a party spirit that originated among the group, leading to the formation of rival groups and eventually evolving into different churches and denominations. When Azusa Street lost the unity of the Spirit the movement lost an integral part of its momentum, in the end developing into a small group of believers who had lost any influence on the Pentecostal movement.