Mission: The True Pentecostal Heritage as Illustrated in Early British AoG Thinking

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Abstract

Pneumatology has defined Pentecostalism since its inception and mission has been a constant aspect of its expression. I believe there has been a misrepresentation of the true nature and purpose of Spirit baptism especially an over emphasis on experience and particularly tongues. In this essay I briefly review the origins of Pentecostalism with an emphasis on GB&I AoG suggesting the past is vital in understanding Pentecostal heritage. I propose Mission and not tongues is the true Pentecostal Heritage within which pneumatology is ‘simply’ an essential means to an end (Acts 1:8).

Biblical Heritage

Mission can be defined simply as: ‘publishing the gospel message both home and abroad’. It has been the heart beat of the Pentecostal movement since its inception in the early 20th century. George Peters sets out the historical context and also the present day need of true biblical based evangelism. He asserts that mission is at the very heart of Christian experience and service by stating:

We are moving within the center [sic] stream of the New Testament when I assert that the principal task of the Church is to communicate intelligibly and effectively a divine message to the world in order to bring man to a living relationship with Christ by faith.²

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Peters reveals the true calling of all Christians, communicating the Gospel. Pentecostals have been at the forefront of this communication. This task was commenced by the embryonic Church in Acts. Their message and experience thrust them into proclaiming the truth revealed from God, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Immediately after the supernatural events of Pentecost Peter turned to the crowd and began to preach Jesus. His confidence in the reality of his experience in the Upper Room and the years of companionship with Jesus, sealed by 40 days of intensive training caused Peter to challenge them to believe in Jesus, accept the Gospel and receive the Spirit. Pentecostals are simply carrying out the task of evangelisation as presented in the Acts 1-2 paradigm. For Pentecostals the primary function of Spirit baptism is empowerment for witness.\(^3\) Pentecostals accept the words of Acts 1:8, to indicate Jesus’ understanding of the role of the Spirit - power to witness. The view is supported from Acts 2:8, 17-18, 38&39, God’s promise is for all believers. David Petts agrees with this view when he writes of the Holy Spirit: ‘He is also given that we might be empowered to be effective witnesses for Christ. Jesus called this being baptised in the Holy Spirit...’\(^4\) The theological understanding of the reception of the Holy Spirit in the individual’s experience is expressed in the area of church missions. Acts 2:8-11 illustrates how every point of the compass was represented at Pentecost foreshadowing the worldwide expansion of Christian mission, this is supported by Acts 8:25-39, 10, 11 & 16. Mission is no optional extra the task requires supernatural enabling this is where the Holy Spirit enters the fray. In Acts the Spirit is the ‘Director of Missions’ and individuals are ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’ and engaging in Gospel proclamation Acts 2, 4:8&31, 6:5&8, 8:4-8. The spark of Christian missions which has continued to burn over the centuries began on the day of Pentecost. Michael Green comments:

> At one level the church began with Abraham. He was the father of the faithful. At another, it began with Jesus, who called the first disciples to come, follow him. But it is no less true to see the birthday

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of the church as the day of Pentecost, when God’s Spirit fell on the disciples to equip them for world mission.5

‘Equip them for world mission’ is a phrase that should motivate and excite Pentecostals; to focus on anything else does a great disservice to the Lord of the harvest Mt.9:37-38 & Lk.10:2. Believers are simply labourers in that harvest seeking God’s will and power in order to carry out the task of evangelisation. The early believers had to grasp the vision of expansion or face extinction. The Apostles began their missionary endeavours immediately they were equipped, at times against severe opposition nothing daunting they continued, Acts 4:1-21, 5:17-42, 7:54-60, 8:1-4, 12:1-19 & 2 Cor. 11:23-33, the reality being that people responded to the message and committed themselves to Christ.

For Pentecostals responsibility for Gospel proclamation is on the individual within their own cultural and socio-economic situation without doing a disservice to the totality of Gospel truth.6 The responsibility today is upon the Church to be as the disciples in Acts 4:31: ‘And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly’. Robert Menzies comments:

This missiological understanding of Spirit-baptism, rooted in the Pentecost account of Acts 1-2, gives important definition to the experience… Pentecostals have articulated a clear purpose: power for mission…Yet Luke’s distinctive voice calls us to remember that the church, by virtue of its reception of the Pentecostal gift, is a prophetic community empowered for a missionary task.7

It is this ‘definition’ of experience and purpose that is crucial to the link between Pentecostal theology, missiology and experience - experience cannot be the sole driving force behind an individual’s desire for the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. The Acts 1:8 missionary mandate model places the onus upon the individual to proclaim the gospel message: this is the true Pentecostal heritage! John Wyckoff supports this view by stating:

Speaking in tongues is not the ultimate purpose, nor is it the reason that the experience is to be desired. The need for supernatural power

6 Full Gospel contains the birth, life, death, resurrection and return of Jesus including water baptism and the availability of the Holy Spirit.
7 W. W. Menzies, Spirit, 82-83.
to witness and serve is the reason a distinctive experience of the baptism in the Holy Spirit is important. The ultimate need is for every member in the body of Christ to be thus empowered so the Church might operate in the full dimension of life in the Spirit.  

This purpose driven experience has thrust Pentecostalism to the forefront of missions Allan Anderson sheds light on the important relationship:

Pentecostalism has probably been the fastest growing religious movement in the twentieth century and it is now found in almost every country in the world. One of the reasons for this must surely be because it has always had a strong emphasis on mission and evangelism. From the beginning Pentecostals and Charismatics have been involved in these activities, but this has always issued from their strong pneumatology.

I concur with Anderson that mission and pneumatology are inextricably linked but one must also give credence to the importance of Pentecostal eschatology. The eschatological emphasis of Pentecostal pneumatology in relation to the Acts 2 model and Joel 2 prophecy provides the defining principle in Pentecostal mission. Grant McClung encapsulates this viewpoint when he writes:

At the heart of the early Pentcostals’ missiology was their personal experience with the Holy Spirit found around an altar of prayer with fellow seekers. This profound experience was integrated with an eschatological urgency and a passion for souls (eschatology/experience/evangelism). Apparently, their earliest understandings of the experience that came to be known as the ‘Baptism in The Holy Spirit’ was that it produced missiological fervour and ministry and it provided empowerment for the same.

The urgency and passion of this renewed eschatological emphasis pressed Pentecostals into service through missions. Azusa Street leader William J. Seymour advocated the vital aspect of Christian service when he stated:

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'Now, do not go from this meeting and talk about tongues, but try and get people saved.'\(^{11}\) Cecil M. Robeck, Jr. writes of Seymour:

Any analysis of Seymour’s sermons reveals the extent to which the pastor attempted to move his people with his preaching. Many of his sermons seem to have focussed on the need for his followers to receive the baptism in the Spirit so they might carry the gospel message forward to others.\(^{12}\)

Seymour’s attitude is summarised by Robeck, Jr. he gives insight into the misplaced urgency of some at Azusa to get to mission field without serious training and or preparation believing that xenolalic tongues was the only necessary requirement for overseas service.\(^{13}\) The contrasting interpretations of the gift and use of tongues is relevant within this developmental period. This interpretation brought disappointment and some missionaries became disillusioned, and were made to rethink their pneumatology before embarking upon further missionary activity.\(^{14}\) This encouragement to action was heeded by the congregation and the Pentecostal gospelsization commenced. Some of the first Azusa missionaries were: A.G. & Lillian Garr to India 1906, Abundio & Rosa de Lopez reached out to Latin American immigrants in Los Angeles, Frank Bartleman, Lucy Leatherman and Daniel Awry. Others who re-entered the missionary fray were Samuel & Ardella Mead, Robert & Myrtle Schider and George & Mary Berg to name but a few.\(^{15}\) As with Seymour I propose that the central theme of Pentecostal theology and ministry must be mission; charismatic experience is but a means to an end. It is my position that mission and not tongues or any other charismata, is the true heritage of Pentecost.

Early British Perspectives with particular reference to AoG


\(^{12}\) Robeck, Jr. *Azusa Street*, 161.


\(^{15}\) Robeck Jr., *Azusa*, 187-280.
How did the development of British Pentecostalism and in particular AoG mirror this Azusa/Seymour inspired desire to ‘carry the gospel message forward to others’? Early British overseas involvement was highlighted by the work of the Pentecostal Missionary Union (P.M.U.). The contents of the journal Flames of Fire 1911-1917 should be consulted for details of missionary involvement with P.M.U. Allan Anderson commenting on this development of Pentecostal mission states:

As there were no organized Pentecostal denominations during the first decade of Pentecostal missions, some attempts were made to coordinate the activities of the various missionaries. One of the more successful was the Pentecostal Missionary Union for Great Britain and Ireland.

A.A. Boddy was a vital link in the development of British Pentecostalism through his pneumatology and involvement with the P.M.U. Boddy was impressed and influenced by T. B. Barratt, an Englishman resident in Norway who was largely responsible for promoting European Pentecostalism. Barratt had visited America and experienced a personal Baptism in the Holy Spirit in 1906 returning to Scandinavia to promote the new teaching and experience. Boddy invited Barratt to Sunderland to preach the result being Boddy’s subsequent embracing of Pentecostal theology and experience. Boddy and early Pentecostalism in Britain cannot be separated neither can his life long association with Anglicanism. Boddy’s influence was particularly significant between 1907 and 1914, through the annual Whitsun Conventions in Sunderland and the publication of the journal Confidence 1908-1926.

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Another key figure in the rise of British Pentecostal missions was Cecil Polhill, one of the famous ‘Cambridge Seven’.\(^{19}\) Polhill returned to England from China due to medical advice, en-route he visited Azusa Street where he received his own personal experience of the Baptism in the Spirit. Upon his return to Britain he became involved with Boddy at Sunderland and the P.M.U. was formed. W.F.P. Burton was a dominant figure at the roots of early British Pentecostalism especially through his development of the Congo Evangelistic Mission. Burton was a Pentecostal pioneer to Africa in 1915 and was also instrumental in calling for a uniting of the disparate Pentecostalist groups in Britain.\(^{20}\) In South Wales a Congregational minister Rev. T.M. Jeffreys of Waunlwyd, Ebbw Vale was prominent in the early development of Pentecostalism he too became engaged with Boddy and P.M.U. and helped to stoke the fires of Pentecost in the Welsh Valleys.\(^{21}\) Assemblies of God GB&I came into existence as a fellowship of like minded believers in 1924 after other abortive attempts to unite disparate Pentecostal congregations around Britain.\(^{22}\) The actions of a group of Welsh Pentecostals who labelled themselves ‘Assemblies of God in Wales and Monmouthshire’ is particularly significant at this early stage. Between 1921 and 1923 this group based around the towns of Crosskeys, Risca and Newbridge just north of Newport, were in correspondence with American Assemblies of God seeking closer fellowship and ‘presbytery status’ within that organisation. This series of letters helped spark a British response

\(^{19}\) The Cambridge Seven emerged from Cambridge University to work with the China Inland Mission in 1885; C.T. Studd was the most famous of the seven. John Usher, ‘The Significance of Cecil H. Polhill for the development of Early Pentecostalism’, *JEPTA*, 2009, 2, 36-60. The P.M.U was eventually absorbed into the AoG GB&I in 1925.


\(^{21}\) Information on T.M. Jeffreys can be found in *Flames of Fire* and *Confidence* magazines.

eventually leading to AoG GB&I being formed. Mission was at the core of early AoG churches in Britain the current AoG adherents should be aware of their vast spiritual mission based heritage. Exploring the links between a distinctive AoG pneumatology and missionary involvement is a key issue; from a ‘classical’ AoG/Pentecostalist understanding of Acts 1& 2, Christians should be ‘doing mission’ rather than focussing on charismatic gifts and especially tongues. The early AoG pioneers appear genuine in their interpretation and application of scripture; their desire was to experience the same God they read of as being at work in the Book of Acts. With mission at the heart of the new AoG denomination the first General Presbytery did lay down guidelines for missions. These are found in the Minutes of the General Presbytery held in London, May 8th and 9th 1924, there is a section devoted to missionary work and missionary financial issues. The introductory remarks to these eight Minutes read:

Whereas our Lord Jesus Christ said to His disciples, ‘Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature,’ we believe it is also our privilege and responsibility to exert all the powers of the full Gospel Message to the uttermost parts of the earth, according to New Testament methods.

Specific guidelines for individuals pursuing a missionary call were also recorded:

2. A definite call to Missionary work.
3. An endorsement and acceptance of the Fundamental Truths.
4. Physical, Mental and Spiritual fitness for the work.
5. A Christian standing, being endorsed by their Local Assemblies.

It is interesting that initially a personal Pentecostal Baptism in the Holy Spirit was not a prerequisite for missionary candidates. This differs from the original position taken by P.M.U. where an obvious evidence of Spirit

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23 I am grateful to Desmond Cartwright Elim historian for making copies of these letters available to me.
24 I use the term ‘classical’ to refer to the original major Pentecostal denominations in GB, i.e. Apostolic, Elim & AoG.
25 The 1924 General Presbytery drew up a list of Fundamental Truths available from the Donald Gee Centre Mattersey.
26 Minutes, 8th – 9th May 1924, 9-11
27 Minutes, May 1924.
Baptism was required by candidates. Although I would suggest that Spirit Baptism was the anticipated ‘norm’ for all AoG adherents and as P.M.U. was eventually absorbed into AoG, this personal experience would have been accepted. All candidates would have had to agree with this fundamental theological tenet and would have been expected to seek and promote this spiritual experience. From the outset AoG was a mission oriented denomination. The first issue of Redemption Tidings (RT) July 1924 contains an article by Donald Gee entitled ‘Jesus Is Coming Again’ in which Gee combines the eschatological emphasis of Pentecost and the necessity of presenting the message of Christ’s soon return. This initial emphasis on eschatology and Spirit Baptism is a vital link for rediscovering the true heritage of Pentecost within AoG. An urgency to go and make disciples - not merely gain converts - was key to the early success of the denomination in GB&I. The Missionary Notes section of the RT makes interesting reading particularly in the early years that were beset by economic depression and social upheaval. The effects of the First World War were devastating upon the British economy yet despite their financial hardships Pentecostal believers continued to give to missions. The major fields of service for British Pentecostal missionaries were India, China and Congo. Again in the first issue of RT missionary news is made available, Brother and Sister Johnstone from Congo, Sisters Morrell and Graves to China, Brother and Sister Thomas in Congo and Sister Toerin in Congo is mentioned. Along with this is a longer article entitled ‘News from Congo-Land’. Financial contributions for missionaries are also listed with a total of £87 and 5 shillings was donated by various individuals and assemblies. The finance was designated to particular missionaries, Mr. Norman Burley, Mr. & Mrs. Bristow, Congo Evangelistic Mission, Mr. E. Hodgson, Mr. Stoddard, Mr. & Mrs. Thomas, Mrs. Turney and Mr. Willie Boyd; see the table on the next page.

30 Redemption Tidings July 1924, 15-17.
Early British Pentecostal missionary interest is illustrated within the context of SE. Wales. Donald Gee records that in 1911:

The missionary work of the Pentecostal Missionary Union soon gained a specially warm place in the hearts of the Welsh Pentecostal Friends...The offerings of the Welsh Assemblies for foreign missionary work have sometimes been heart-moving in their generosity during times of deep poverty throughout the Valleys.31

By 1911 Wales was living in the ever decreasing and dim afterglow of the 1904-05 Revival and was also suffering great social and economic unrest. There had been a significant change in the employment situations with many in-migrants and immigrants especially to SE. Wales in search of better remuneration within the coal and steel industries. Social conditions were poor, overcrowding, poor health care and sanitary conditions coupled with the low wages paid by coal owners and steel magnates resulted in many living in poverty. The Great War 1914-18 also impacted the society many lost their lives on the battlefields of Europe and economic depression followed soon after the end of hostilities. Yet despite the difficult circumstances Pentecostalism flourished in the towns and villages of the Welsh Valleys, one such town was Crosskeys. Crosskeys Pentecostal Church became the centre for much Pentecostal activity in SE. Wales.32

‘Second Comers’ was a term often used to describe early Pentecostals – particularly AoG members in S. Wales - as this was their driving force in mission: ‘are you ready’? was a widely used evangelistic challenge – i.e. ready for the return of Christ! The assembly at Crosskeys came into

32 My association with Crosskeys has been as long as my father David has pastored the work which is now 15 years. I also currently assist with ministry.
existence as a result of T.L. Hicks and Tom Mercy, both early Executive Board Members of AoG, visiting Boddy at Sunderland between 1908 & 1914, upon their return they were ostracised from their local chapels and set about establishing the work at Gladstone Street Crosskeys, the present assembly is still located on the same site. Mission was an important aspect of ministry within the Welsh Pentecostal context so Gee recording the history of the region, writes:

About 1912 a Pentecostal work took root in the large village of Crosskeys, where two narrow valleys meet about nine miles north-west of Newport Mon., that was destined to become a fruitful centre both of influence throughout Wales, and foreign missionary interest. The Crosskeys assembly had a major impact on both national and international Pentecostalism and in particular AoG, its devotion to mission is still apparent today. Coupled with overseas missions, home missions was also an important part of Pentecostal evangelism. The conversion of one’s neighbour through means of personal evangelism and the prominence of gospel preaching particularly on Sunday evenings was an essential aspect of ministry. In the early years of its existence Crosskeys held regular open-air services in strategic sites around the village. The hard working and hard playing mining community was often harsh towards the Second Comers ridicule and jesting confronted the believers in their everyday lives. But despite the opposition the church grew and became a centre for Pentecostal witness in South Wales. Alfred F. Missen chronicling the history of AoG in GB&I records the following interesting facts:

Under the ministry of Tom Mercy, the work at Crosskeys grew quickly and attracted visitors from all over South Wales. Before long T.L. Hicks was pastoring a work at Cwmfelinfach and A.L. Jenkins an assembly at Newbridge. In 1934, when the present spacious premises were opened, it was claimed that no less than forty assemblies owed their existence directly or in directly to this ‘mother’ assembly. The signature of Tom Mercy appeared on the first circular which gave rise to the formation of our fellowship.

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33 Gee, *Wind and Flame*, 77.
34 Although the Crosskeys assembly withdrew from AoG in 2008 the members are still committed to financial support of worldwide missions and are endeavouring to present the gospel in a local context.
The relevance and significance of the teaching received through the Crosskeys leaders inspired their spiritual daughter churches to continue the interest in missions.

Writing in 1928 in the Pentecostal Evangel Sidney Mercy relates how Pentecost came to South Wales. The Crosskeys assembly of which he was the founder believed in ‘verbal inspiration of the Bible, Divine healing, Holiness, the Gifts of the Spirit, the Lord’s Second Coming and Pentecost with the sign of Tongues’ this theological position gave people a heart for mission Mercy continues:

We preach tithes and freewill offerings and in eleven years the sum of approximately $16,236 has been contributed to foreign missions alone, which does not include considerable amounts contributed for home needs. Against a backdrop of world war, economic depression and social upheaval this financial interest must be commended and set up as a great example to follow. Redemption Tidings continued to chart the progress of early Welsh AoG missionaries in June 1924 recording the ‘sending’ of Sister Mary Taylor of Newport, T. Evans of Aberaman, Mr. & Mrs. G. Thomas, Dowlais, Miss. May Rensley, Miss. Annie Jones – Ystrad, Garfield Owen, E.J. North, Mr. & Mrs. Walters – Aberaman and Bernard Fox of Newport all leaving South Wales for foreign fields of service. What motivated the poor believers in Wales to financially support and volunteer for missionary work overseas? I suggest it was closely related to the areas of pneumatology and mission with the eschatological urgency expressed in a desire to see people ‘saved’, which were at the core of early AoG teaching and practice. This is emphasised by P. Corry writing in RT:

If the Baptism in the Holy Spirit means anything it means reaching out unto the uttermost parts of the earth and in order to enable us to launch out into greater and more aggressive missionary enterprise.

The hardships were worth enduring in light of the greater need of furthering the Gospel. It was not solely overseas mission that motivated AoG adherents, Home Missions was also on the agenda this is summarised in one

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38 Redemption Tidings, October 1924, 21-22.
39 Redemption Tidings, January 1925, 5.
crucial phrase recorded in RT which states it was the desire of AoG leadership for there to ‘be assemblies established in every village’, quite a vision and a task but supported by the empowering Holy Spirit recognised as achievable.

**Concluding thoughts!**

In assessing the role of mission within the heritage of Pentecostalism I have been challenged by the urgency, vision, passion and sacrifice of the early pioneers. If we revive these desires then we will avoid becoming ‘holy rollers’ with little future and no impact. Seymour’s words must prevail ‘go and try to get people saved’.

**Select Bibliography**

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