

How Azusa Street Exposed—and Overturned—Racism in the Church

It was the fall of 1906 when G.B. Cashwell, a holiness preacher from Dunn, North Carolina, boarded a train to make a six-day, cross-country trip to Los Angeles, California.

For months he had been reading accounts of how the baptism of the Holy Spirit was being poured out at a little mission on Azusa Street. The stories stirred a hunger in the preacher for his own personal Pentecost. He began seeking the Lord for the baptism of the spirit but could not receive. The frustrated pastor finally decided his only choice was to go to the revival itself.

Cashwell arrived in Los Angeles on a Sunday and immediately went to Azusa with great expectation. However when he entered the mission the scene was not what he expected. Being a white preacher from the south, he found the mixing of the races to be too much for his own personal prejudice. He left offended. He could not bring himself to allow a black man to lay hands on him in prayer.

Cashwell felt he had wasted the trip. That night he wrestled with the Lord in prayer. He came to the conclusion that if he wanted to experience Pentecost, he would have to crucify his own prejudice. He went back to the mission and straight to the altar. There he prostrated himself in the dirt and sawdust and repented before the Lord. As Cashwell wept and prayed, William Seymour, the black pastor leading the revival, came and laid hands on the white preacher. Cashwell was immediately baptized in the Holy Spirit.

This man's life was forever changed because he took down the wall that stood between him and the blessing. Cashwell spent

the next six days at the mission before making his way back to the Carolinas where he would eventually rent a warehouse and begin holding his own services. These meetings became known as Azusa East.

Today hundreds of spirit-filled churches on the east coast trace their roots directly back to G.B. Cashwell and his meetings in Dunn, North Carolina. Oh, how things could have turned out differently had Cashwell not humbled himself that first night at Azusa. So many have been blessed because of the willingness of a man to surrender his own prejudice and find the reconciliation afforded by revival.

I was in Charlotte, North Carolina last week hours after the protests had turned violent. Unfortunately this has become an all too familiar scene: neighborhoods destroyed, stores looted, property burned and people terrorized, all while a militarized police force swarms the streets.

This is not the America we knew a decade ago.

I wept over the city as I prayed for the healing of our land. This is the most divided I've ever seen our nation and that divide widens with each passing day. We are literally tearing ourselves apart from the inside. If it is true, united we stand, divided we fall then, my friend, we are falling rapidly. The answer for America is not political, it is spiritual. No political leader has the solution for what ails us. We need divine intervention. We need revival!

Sound too simplistic?

There is something to be learned from Azusa that offers hope for us today, if we are willing to take notice. Consider for a moment just how unique this move of God truly was. This was the turn of the 20th century. Racism ruled supreme in all corners of the country. However at Azusa those lines of separation vanished. William Seymour was overseeing something that defied reason. People from all different walks of life

were coming together to participate in this revival. It is one of the truly remarkable and uncelebrated phenomenons of Azusa. In many ways it could be considered the first civil rights movement of the 1900s and it started in a multi-racial prayer meeting!

It was written that, "The 'color line' was washed away in the blood." Another, declared "the 'Azusa' work had rediscovered the blood of Christ to the church ... it was a sort of 'first love' of the early church returned. The baptism as we received it in the beginning did not allow us to think, speak or hear evil of any man."

How had Azusa accomplished what so few could have even imagined at that time? Simple, at the heart of revival is a message of reconciliation—first to God and, as a consequence, to one another.

Isn't this exactly what we celebrate about the first Pentecostal revival we read about in the second chapter of Acts? They were all in one place and in one accord. Upon that unity, the blessing of the Holy Spirit was poured out. On that day, the walls of separation and hostility were forever brought down as Christ birthed one unified body out of many flawed individuals. The division between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female dissolved as they entered the kingdom of God by the thousands.

This was also the case when the baptism of Pentecost was rediscovered in 1906 at Azusa. That revival produced a miraculous unity in a time of great division. Everyone regardless of race, class or gender was welcomed into the fold at Azusa. Today that fold has grown to three hundred million people world wide. It may seem too simplistic to some, but my faith is emboldened by our history. These Pentecostal moves of God changed the world. It can happen again!

Today as the divide between the races widen and the separation

between political aisles grows, we stand in need of a greater latter day outpouring. The violence we see in the streets is symptomatic of a far greater illness that continues to grow within this nation like a metastasized cancer. This is the time that a spirit-filled, unified church is needed most. However she must awaken from her slumber lest our land become a casualty from our own state of compromise.

It is unfortunate that the divide we witness in our streets is also reflected within our sanctuaries. We live in a day when the sheer number of churches in a community speaks not to necessity, but disunity. We have allowed silly arguments and senseless doctrines to separate and segregate the saints. How can a divided church truly claim to be spirit-filled? This is so contrary to the Scripture that I wonder if we even notice how backslidden we truly are. A church in disunity has no authority to speak to a divided land. This has to become a major point of prayer!

We need a long night with the Lord like G.B. Cashwell had where our own prejudice and pride is crucified so that we might enter into the blessing the Lord has for us. God is not in need of *another* church, He is looking for *one* church! The moment we rediscover that unity, both heaven and hell will take notice.

Let the story of Azusa fill you with hope. The outpouring of the spirit brings about what is impossible through human effort. True revival produces a miraculous unity within the body. It fills the church and spills out into the city offering reconciliation and reform. On that day, the divisions of race, denomination, and politics disappear. What remains is a single body made up of sanctified individuals bound to one another in love. The streets in our nation need to see that church in action!

Hopefully you are part of a community that is contending for such a move of God in your city. If not, perhaps it's time to

find one. {eoa}

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