

# Holiness & Pentecostalism

*From Wesleyan holiness to Azusa Street — the fastest-growing Christian movement of the twentieth century • c. 1835–today*

By Shane Gunn • Primary-source study

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**Where this fits:** Lesson 24 of the Pleasant Springs *Church History* series. The Holiness movement grows directly out of **Wesleyan theology (Lesson 21)** and the **Second Great Awakening (Lesson 22)**. Pentecostalism emerges out of Holiness at Azusa Street in 1906. The story covers roughly 170 years and ends with one of the largest religious movements in human history. See the full **Series Timeline**.

## WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

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On 9 April 1906, in a rented former livery stable at 312 Azusa Street in Los Angeles, a one-eyed Black Holiness preacher named **William J. Seymour** led a revival that he, along with most Pentecostals since, interpreted as a fresh Pentecost of the Holy Spirit. Over the next three years, the **Azusa Street Revival** drew tens of thousands of visitors from across the country and the world. Seekers reportedly received what they called the “baptism of the Holy Spirit,” evidenced most distinctively by speaking in tongues (*glossolalia*). The gathering was multiracial at a moment when most American churches were not. It produced a missionary zeal that carried the movement to every continent within a decade. Visitors to 312 Azusa founded what became the Assemblies of God, the Church of God in Christ, the Foursquare Gospel Church, and, indirectly, hundreds of other denominations.

A century later, **classical Pentecostalism and the broader charismatic movement together are estimated at roughly 600–650 million Christians worldwide**, making Spirit-baptism Christianity by far the fastest-growing and numerically largest family in global Protestantism. In the Global South — Brazil, Nigeria, South Korea, the Philippines — Pentecostal churches are the dominant form of evangelical Christianity. The movement that began in 1906 in a Los Angeles livery stable is, in the early 21st century, reshaping global Christianity as consequentially as the Reformation did.

This lesson traces the story from its Wesleyan roots in the 1830s, through the Holiness movement of the late 19th century, to Azusa Street and its aftermath.

*Greek NT (Acts 2:4): και ἑπλήσθησαν πάντες πνεύματος ἁγίου, και ἤρξαντο λαλεῖν ἑτέραις γλώσσαις καθὼς τοῦ πνεῦμα ἐδίδου ἀποφθέγγεσθαι αὐτοῖς.*

Acts 2:4 (ESV): “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

## PART 1 — WESLEYAN ROOTS (1740S–1830S)

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The Pentecostal story begins in John Wesley’s doctrine of **Christian perfection** or **entire sanctification** — the Methodist conviction, set out most fully in Wesley’s *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1766), that after conversion a believer can experience a second definite work of grace in which the Holy Spirit cleanses the heart from indwelling sin and fills it with perfect love. Wesley insisted this was not freedom from ignorance or weakness, and it did not produce moral infallibility; but it did mean that the believer’s dominant orientation was now love of God and neighbor rather than indwelling corruption (see **Lesson 21 Part 8**).

For the first century of American Methodism, Wesleyan perfection was taught but often as a distant horizon few claimed to reach. The Holiness movement’s distinctive move was to make the experience *ordinary, attainable, and datable* — something the serious believer could and should seek at a specific altar on a specific evening.

## Phoebe Palmer (1807–1874)

METHODIST LAYWOMAN IN NEW YORK CITY • HELD THE “TUESDAY MEETING FOR THE PROMOTION OF HOLINESS” FROM 1835 UNTIL HER DEATH • PUBLISHED *THE WAY OF HOLINESS* (1843)

Holiness mother

Altar theology

Palmer was the single most influential American Holiness teacher of the 19th century. With her sister Sarah Lankford she organized the “Tuesday Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness” at her home in lower Manhattan beginning in 1835. Over the next four decades the weekly meeting drew Methodist clergy, visiting bishops, Presbyterian and Congregational ministers, and Baptists alike.

**Palmer’s “altar theology”** simplified Wesleyan perfection into three steps — *entire consecration, faith, and testimony*:

- Lay all you have and are on the altar of Christ (Rom 12:1).
- Believe God’s promise that “the altar sanctifies the gift” (Matt 23:19).
- Testify publicly that God has sanctified you — regardless of whether you feel anything.

Palmer’s teaching made entire sanctification a crisis event pursued at specific meetings, usually with a visible public testimony afterward. Her books (*The Way of Holiness* 1843, *Faith and Its Effects* 1848, *Promise of the Father* 1859) shaped a generation. Her theology of “the altar” is the direct ancestor of later Pentecostal altar services.

**The National Camp Meeting Association.** In 1867, Methodist ministers John Inskip and William Osborn organized the first national camp meeting specifically for the promotion of Christian holiness at Vineland, New Jersey. The movement held national camp meetings

annually and became the **National Holiness Association** (1893), the institutional home of late-19th-century American Holiness teaching.

**The “Come-Outer” Holiness Denominations.** By the 1880s, tensions between Holiness advocates and mainstream Methodism were pushing some Holiness people out of the denomination entirely. They founded new “come-outer” bodies:

- **The Free Methodist Church** (B. T. Roberts, 1860) — a Methodist split over slavery and Holiness teaching.

- **The Church of God (Anderson)** (D. S. Warner, 1881) — anti-denominational Holiness.

- **The Wesleyan Methodist Connection** (1843) — split over slavery, later Holiness.

- **The Church of the Nazarene** (Phineas Bresee and others, 1908) — formed by merging several Holiness bodies, still one of the largest Holiness denominations.

- **The Salvation Army** (William Booth, 1865 in London) — a Methodist-trained Holiness preacher’s mission to the urban poor.

### **PART 3 — THE KESWICK STREAM (FROM 1875)**

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A parallel — and eventually quite different — tributary emerged in England in 1875 with the first **Keswick Convention** in the Lake District. The American Quakers Robert Pearsall Smith and his wife Hannah Whitall Smith (author of the devotional classic *The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life*, 1875) led the founding meetings. Keswick taught a similar second blessing, but framed it as “**the exchanged life**” — not a cleansing from sin’s *presence* (Wesleyan perfection) but a moment-by-moment victory in which the believer surrenders and trusts the indwelling Christ, who lives his victorious life through them.

Keswick theology influenced D. L. Moody, F. B. Meyer, Andrew Murray, and a generation of Reformed and Baptist evangelicals who could not sign on to Wesleyan perfectionism. It became the sanctification theology of much 20th-century Reformed and evangelical devotional writing (Charles Trumbull, Watchman Nee's *The Normal Christian Life*).

**The common factor.** Both Wesleyan Holiness and Keswick taught a *second distinct work of the Spirit* after conversion. This doctrinal commonality — even when they disagreed about its content — set the stage for Pentecostalism's fusion.

## PART 4 — CHARLES PARHAM & TOPEKA (1901)

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### Charles Fox Parham (1873–1929)

METHODIST-TRAINED INDEPENDENT HOLINESS EVANGELIST •  
FOUNDED BETHEL BIBLE SCHOOL, TOPEKA, KANSAS, 1900

Topeka outpouring

Initial evidence doctrine

Parham operated an independent Bethel Bible School in Topeka in late 1900 with about forty students. The question he set his students to study over the Christmas 1900 break: *What is the biblical evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit?* The students returned with a unanimous answer: *speaking in tongues*, as at Pentecost (Acts 2:4).

On the night of **1 January 1901**, Parham laid hands on a student named **Agnes Ozman** (1870–1937), praying that she would receive the Spirit-baptism. She reportedly began speaking in what was identified at the time as Chinese (a claim subsequent linguistic examination did not confirm). Other students followed in the days that followed. This is sometimes called the first “Pentecostal” event of the modern movement, though Parham's Topeka outbreak remained regional.

**Parham's doctrinal contribution:** the *initial evidence* teaching — the conviction that tongues is the required biblical sign of Spirit-baptism. This is a specifically Pentecostal distinctive; the broader charismatic movement later softened it.

**Parham's later career.** Parham's movement expanded modestly until 1906, when his student William Seymour launched the far larger Azusa

Street revival. Parham visited Los Angeles in October 1906, disapproved of what he saw (especially the multiracial worship, which offended his white-supremacist instincts), and was largely rejected by Seymour's followers. Parham was arrested in San Antonio in 1907 on a charge of sodomy — never proved in court and later dropped, though the stain remained on his reputation. He died in relative obscurity in 1929.

## PART 5 — WILLIAM SEYMOUR & AZUSA STREET (1906–1915)

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### William Joseph Seymour (1870–1922)

BORN TO FORMER SLAVES, CENTERVILLE, LOUISIANA • BLINDED IN ONE EYE BY SMALLPOX • HOLINESS PREACHER IN HOUSTON • STUDIED UNDER PARHAM (SEGREGATED CLASSROOM) 1905 • PASTOR AT AZUSA STREET, LOS ANGELES, 1906–1922

Azusa Street

Multi-racial

Global impact

Seymour was a 35-year-old Black preacher who had sat in the hallway (because of Texas segregation laws) to listen to Parham's Houston Bible school lectures in 1905. He had accepted the tongues-as-evidence teaching but had not yet personally received it. In February 1906, invited to pastor a small Holiness mission in Los Angeles, he arrived and preached the doctrine of Spirit-baptism with initial evidence. The congregation locked him out of the building. Moved to a house on Bonnie Brae Street. On the evening of 9 April 1906, at 214 Bonnie Brae, a man named Edward Lee received the experience; a seven-year-old girl, Jennie Moore, followed, then others. Seymour himself received the experience on 12 April.

Crowds became too large for the house. On 14 April 1906, Seymour moved to a run-down former African Methodist Episcopal church building at **312 Azusa Street** in a racially mixed industrial area of Los Angeles. For the next three years services ran practically continuously — three a day, seven days a week. The **Los Angeles Times** published a sensational account on 18 April

1906 titled “Weird Babel of Tongues.” A week later the San Francisco earthquake struck, contributing to eschatological excitement.

*“The color line was washed away in the blood of Christ.”*

— **Frank Bartleman (white Holiness preacher, eyewitness), describing the Azusa Street services**

**What Azusa Street looked like.** No platform, no choir, no bulletins, no racial segregation. Black and white worshippers; Latino, Asian, and European immigrant participants; men and women preaching together; services lasting all night. Reports of physical healings, speaking in tongues, prophecy. **Jennie Evans Moore** (whom Seymour would marry in 1908) played the piano. Black and white children prayed side by side at the altar — an experience that, in 1906 Los Angeles, was itself a minor miracle.

**The global impact.** Visitors to Azusa between 1906 and 1909 carried the Pentecostal message back to every continent. Within three years there were Pentecostal missions in India (1906), Norway (1906), Chile (1909), China (1907), the Netherlands (1907), Brazil (1910), South Africa (1908). Thirty-eight missionaries left Los Angeles in 1906 alone. The revival was multi-racial, global, and led by a Black pastor — a combination no previous revival had produced.

**The eventual fading.** By 1909–1910 the revival had cooled, and by 1914 Azusa Street was back to a small Black neighborhood congregation. Seymour continued as its pastor until his death in 1922. His widow Jennie led the congregation until 1931, when the building was foreclosed and demolished. A plaque marks the site today.

## **PART 6 — THE EARLY PENTECOSTAL DENOMINATIONS (1907–1930)**

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Within five years of Azusa Street, new Pentecostal denominations were organizing across the United States and around the world.

**1907 • Church of God in Christ (COGIC).** Charles Harrison Mason, a Black Holiness preacher, visited Azusa Street in March 1907 and received the Pentecostal experience. He reconstituted his existing Holiness body as a Pentecostal denomination. COGIC is today the largest predominantly Black Pentecostal denomination in the United States (~6 million members) and one of the largest African-American religious bodies.

**1907 • Church of God (Cleveland),** an earlier Holiness body under A. J. Tomlinson in Tennessee, becomes Pentecostal. Today ~7 million worldwide, heavily concentrated in the American Southeast and Latin America.

**1914 • Assemblies of God** formed at a convention in Hot Springs, Arkansas, originally as a fellowship of predominantly white Pentecostal ministers. Today the largest Pentecostal denomination in the world, with ~69 million adherents globally.

**1916 • Oneness Pentecostalism** splits from mainstream Trinitarian Pentecostalism. The “Jesus Only” movement, led by Frank Ewart and others, baptizes only “in the name of Jesus” (Acts 2:38) rather than the triune formula (Matt 28:19) and rejects classical Trinitarian doctrine. Major Oneness denominations: United Pentecostal Church International (1945). Oneness Pentecostalism represents roughly 10–15% of global Pentecostalism today and is regarded by Trinitarian Christians as outside orthodox Christianity.

**1923 • International Church of the Foursquare Gospel** founded by the celebrity evangelist **Aimee Semple McPherson** (1890–1944), one of the most influential Pentecostal leaders of the 20th century and the first woman to found a substantial American denomination.

#### **Distinctive beliefs of classical Pentecostalism:**

- **Conversion** — the new birth as in any evangelical tradition.

- **Sanctification** — a subsequent deeper work (Wesleyan Holiness

Pentecostals) or ongoing process (Reformed/Finished-Work Pentecostals).

- **Spirit-baptism** — a distinct subsequent empowerment, evidenced by speaking in tongues.

- **Spiritual gifts continuing today** — tongues, interpretation, prophecy, healing, words of knowledge, discernment.

- **Premillennial eschatology** — Christ's imminent return drives urgent mission.

## **PART 7 — THE CHARISMATIC RENEWAL (1960S–1980S)**

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For the first half of the twentieth century, Pentecostalism was largely confined to its own denominations, often considered marginal by mainstream evangelicals and Catholics. That changed in 1960.

**April 1960 • Dennis Bennett** (1917–1991), Episcopal rector of St. Mark's in Van Nuys, California, publicly announces to his congregation that he has received the baptism of the Holy Spirit and spoken in tongues. The controversy forces him to resign but leads to his invitation to lead a small Episcopal mission in Seattle, which becomes the launching point of the **Charismatic Renewal in mainline Protestantism**.

**February 1967 •** The “Duquesne Weekend.” A retreat of Duquesne University faculty and students in Pittsburgh, all Roman Catholics, experiences Pentecostal phenomena and launches the **Catholic Charismatic Renewal**. Within five years it spread to every Catholic diocese in the United States and eventually to most countries. By 2000 there were an estimated 120 million Catholic Charismatics worldwide. Pope Paul VI publicly welcomed the movement in 1975.

**1974 onward** • The **Jesus People** movement (from c. 1967 in California) fuses counterculture with Pentecostal-style worship, producing Calvary Chapel (Chuck Smith, 1965) and the Vineyard (John Wimber, 1982), both of which develop softer “Third Wave” charismatic theologies that influence mainstream evangelicalism.

**Three waves, a common rubric.** Peter Wagner popularized the idea of three waves: *First Wave* = classical Pentecostalism from 1906; *Second Wave* = Charismatic Renewal in mainline and Catholic churches from 1960; *Third Wave* = evangelicals embracing the gifts without leaving their denominations, from about 1980. Together the three waves account for the 600+ million figure cited in the opening of this lesson.

## PART 8 — THE GLOBAL PENTECOSTAL CENTURY

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The twentieth century is often described, with good reason, as the *Pentecostal century*. Five statistics capture the movement’s scale:

- In 1900 there were essentially **zero Pentecostals**.
- In 2000, **~500 million**.
- In the early 2020s, **~650 million**, or about 25% of all Christians worldwide.
- The largest single Pentecostal congregation in the world is the **Yoido Full Gospel Church** (Seoul, South Korea, Assemblies of God), founded by David Yonggi Cho in 1958 and at its peak numbered ~830,000 members.
- In Latin America alone, Pentecostals and charismatics grew from less than 1% of the population in 1900 to roughly 30% by 2020 — one of the most dramatic religious shifts in modern history.

**The prosperity gospel concern.** A significant strand within global Pentecostalism, especially in Africa and Latin America, teaches that faith reliably produces material prosperity and physical health — a “name it and claim it” gospel traceable to E. W. Kenyon, popularized by Kenneth Hagin, and spread worldwide by televangelists. The prosperity gospel is rejected by most serious Pentecostal theologians and by nearly every evangelical theologian outside the Pentecostal tradition, but it remains a massive force in some parts of the Pentecostal world. Critique: it contradicts the Sermon on the Mount, the theology of the cross, and the experience of the apostles themselves, for whom faithfulness to Christ produced poverty and death, not yachts.

## WHY THIS MATTERS FOR US

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- **God is still giving his Spirit.** Whatever your tradition’s view of continuing spiritual gifts, the enormous global growth of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity in the last century forces the question: is God at work in this movement? Every serious Christian has to reckon with the numbers and the fruit.

- **Azusa Street was multi-racial before multi-racial churches were respectable.** In 1906 Los Angeles — a city of segregated streetcars and restricted housing — a one-eyed Black pastor led a mixed-race congregation in a working-class neighborhood. Every American Christian of every tradition, at every moment where we have been tempted to sort worship by race, is being questioned by the first three years of the Azusa revival.

- **The testing of the spirits remains necessary.** Parham’s life later tarnished. The prosperity gospel is a real distortion. Some Pentecostal churches

manifest undeniable spiritual power and undeniable abuses side by side. Paul's test remains: "Test everything; hold fast what is good" (1 Thess 5:21).

• **The center of Christianity has moved.** For most of the 20th century, the theological and demographic center of Christianity has been moving from the North Atlantic to the Global South, and from historic liturgical traditions to Pentecostal/charismatic ones. Understanding our moment requires understanding the movement that has done most of that reshaping.

*Greek NT (1 Cor 12:13): και ἄρ ἐν ἐνὶ πνεύματι ἡμεῖς πάντες εἰς ἐν σῶμα ἐβαπτίσθημεν, εἴτε Ἰουδαῖοι εἴτε Ἕλληνες, εἴτε δοῦλοι εἴτε ἐλεύθεροι.*

1 Corinthians 12:13 (ESV): "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free."

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Wesley's "entire sanctification," Palmer's "altar," Keswick's "exchanged life," and Pentecostal "Spirit-baptism" are four versions of a second distinct work of grace. Which (if any) do you find most biblical?

2. The Azusa Street revival was multi-racial in 1906 Los Angeles. What does it cost a congregation today to be genuinely multi-racial? What does it cost us when we are not?

3. Pentecostals believe the gifts of 1 Corinthians 12 continue; most Reformed Protestants have taught they ceased with the apostolic age. Which reading does the New Testament support more clearly? Which does the evidence of the last 120 years support more clearly?

4. Parham's later life raises hard questions about charismatic founders who fall morally. How should we handle a movement whose founders had moral failures?

5. Prosperity-gospel teaching is rejected by most serious Pentecostal theologians but remains widely promoted. How should Bible-believing Christians engage with Pentecostals whose churches teach it?

## CLOSING PRAYER

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Spirit of Pentecost, we thank you for Phoebe Palmer in her Manhattan parlor; for the Bethel Bible School students reading Acts 2 by lamplight; for Agnes Ozman on 1 January 1901; for William Seymour preaching through a locked door; for the Bonnie Brae house and the Azusa livery stable. Thank you for the color line that was washed away in the blood of Christ, however briefly, at 312 Azusa Street. Thank you for 650 million Christians across every continent who know you as a living, present, speaking God. Forgive the distortions the movement has sometimes produced; preserve us from mistaking noise for fire or prosperity for power. Come, Holy Spirit. Amen.

## FURTHER READING

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