

## QUESTION 2

# What Were the Precursors to Pentecostalism?

Many movements and families of churches can trace their origins back to a single person or event in the history of Christianity. Lutherans can look back to Martin Luther in the sixteenth century for their beginnings; most Methodists can trace their history back to the ministry of John Wesley in the eighteenth century; and Anglicans cannot deny that a series of acts of Parliament under King Henry VIII and then under Queen Elizabeth I established the Church of England (and its daughter churches) as a distinct tradition. Yet, for Pentecostals there is no clear equivalent. While there were some very significant and influential figures at the beginning of the movement, there was no single founder of Pentecostalism; nor was there a single place where Pentecostalism began.

Historians have given much consideration to questions surrounding Pentecostal origins. Some trace the movement to events in Kansas in 1901. Others see the origins in Los Angeles in 1906. Yet, as Allan Anderson has argued, this “‘made in the USA’ assumption is one of the great disservices done to worldwide Pentecostalism.”<sup>1</sup> Instead of looking solely to the United States, we should recognize that Pentecostalism has origins in multiple countries. These arose together and influenced one another (often quite quickly), further reinforcing one another. As such, the histories we will consider in this and the next few chapters will overlap.

This perspective is not new. If anything, it is the original understanding of Pentecostal origins, especially outside of the United States. The great early British Pentecostal leader Donald Gee, who had traveled extensively around the Pentecostal world (and probably knew its variety better than nearly

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1. Allan Anderson, “Revising Pentecostal History in Global Perspective,” in *Asian and Pentecostal*, eds. Allan Anderson and Edmond Tang (Baguio City: Regnum, 2005), 152.

anyone else of his generation) took this multiple-origins view of the beginnings of the movement: “The Pentecostal Movement does not owe its origin to any outstanding personality or religious leader, but was a spontaneous revival appearing almost simultaneously in various parts of the world. . . . The outstanding leaders of the Pentecostal Movement are themselves the products of the Movement. They did not make it; it made them.”<sup>2</sup> In the United States, Frank Bartleman, who was present at Azusa Street, wrote that Pentecostalism “was rocked in the cradle of little Wales. It was brought up in India following, becoming full grown in Los Angeles later.”<sup>3</sup> If even a participant in the Azusa Street revival points us to other parts of the world, it would be remiss of us not to turn to Wales and India over the course of these next chapters, as well as to Los Angeles—along with Topeka, Toronto, Oslo, London, Sunderland, and elsewhere. Yet first, we need to consider some earlier developments that were important precursors to the rise of the movement.

### The American Holiness Movement

In the United States, a series of nineteenth-century revivals among Methodists eventually led to the emergence of the Holiness movement, which sought to restore the earlier Wesleyan emphasis on entire sanctification (or Christian perfection). Eventually this led to separate Holiness churches emerging outside of mainline Methodism in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

The Holiness movement emphasized John Wesley’s teaching on Christian perfection, understood as a second blessing of entire sanctification, distinct from justification, to be received at some moment in the Christian life.<sup>5</sup> They frequently referred to this sanctification experience as the “baptism in the Holy Spirit.”<sup>6</sup> In reality, however, their teaching owed more to John Fletcher (1729–1785) than to John Wesley, for it was Fletcher who transformed Wesley’s view of Christian perfection (as “the culmination of a life of holiness”) into “a

2. Donald Gee, *The Pentecostal Movement* (London: Victory Press, 1941), 3.

3. Frank Bartleman, *Azusa Street: An Eyewitness Account* (Gainesville, FL: Bridge-Logos, 1980), 22.

4. Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 41–43.

5. Melvin E. Dieter, “Wesleyan-Holiness Aspects of Pentecostal Origins: As Mediated Through the Nineteenth-Century Holiness Revival,” in *Aspects of Pentecostal-Charismatic Origins*, ed. Vinson Synan (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1975), 59. In fact, Wesleyan Holiness teaching had moved quite far beyond Wesley’s own view on Christian perfection. Geoffrey Butler suggests that comparisons between Wesley’s teaching and what would emerge in Pentecostalism are in reality “due to surface level commonalities.” See Geoffrey Butler, “Wesley, Fletcher, and the Baptism of the Holy Spirit: A Pentecostal Analysis,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 30 (2021): 189.

6. Synan, “Pentecostal Roots,” in *The Century of the Holy Spirit: 100 Years of Pentecostal and Charismatic Renewal*, ed. Vinson Synan (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 15.

crisis experience . . . available to every Christian.”<sup>7</sup> This would pave the way for the doctrine of subsequence (in which the baptism of the Holy Spirit is seen as an experience distinct from and subsequent to regeneration; chapter 19 outlines this doctrine more fully).

In the nineteenth century, this Holiness teaching—along with the language of baptism in the Spirit as a distinct, post-conversion crisis experience—was spread widely by Wesleyans such as Phoebe Palmer and Oberlin Perfectionists such as Asa Mahan.<sup>8</sup> Palmer in particular popularized an emphasis on the baptism of the Spirit as an instantaneous crisis experience through her teaching of a “shorter way” to perfection through placing “all on the altar.”<sup>9</sup>

In the United States (although not always in other countries) the earliest leading figures in the emergence of Pentecostalism came from Wesleyan Holiness backgrounds, including both Charles Parham and William Seymour. Several Wesleyan Holiness denominations or groups of churches also became Pentecostal denominations as the revival spread through their ranks, including the Church of God in Christ, the Church of God, the Fire-Baptized Holiness Church, and the Pentecostal Holiness Church (the last two merging in 1911 to become what is now the International Pentecostal Holiness Church).

Wesleyan Holiness teaching had a significant role to play in the development of an understanding of the baptism in the Holy Spirit as a distinct experience from conversion. However, although some early Pentecostals came directly from a Wesleyan Holiness background, much of the influence of these teachings was mediated to Pentecostalism from other parts of the evangelical world.

### Late-Nineteenth-Century Holiness and Revival Emphases in American Reformed Evangelicalism

In the late nineteenth century, an emphasis on the baptism in the Holy Spirit also emerged among non-Wesleyan evangelicals. Edith Waldvogel has argued that there were three general ways in which this differed from the emphasis given to the matter in Wesleyan Holiness circles. First, she writes, “The context in which Reformed evangelicals expressed their teaching was strongly doctrinal and primarily premillennialist.” The conviction of the imminent return of Christ gave a strong incentive both for holiness and for evangelistic effectiveness. Second, they rejected the Wesleyan concept of a “second blessing”

7. Butler, “Wesley, Fletcher, and the Baptism of the Holy Spirit,” 189.

8. Synan, “Pentecostal Roots,” 26–28; see also Donald W. Dayton, “From Christian Perfection to the ‘Baptism of the Holy Ghost,’” in *Aspects of Pentecostal-Charismatic Origins*, ed. Vinson Synan (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1975), 41–53. Mahan’s theology was essentially Wesleyan, although he himself was a Congregationalist minister, which may account for his influence beyond Wesleyan circles.

9. Synan, *Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition*, 17. See also Dieter, “Wesleyan-Holiness Aspects,” 62.

of entire sanctification. Third, they incorporated (to a much greater extent than Wesleyans) “a practical emphasis on divine healing.”<sup>10</sup>

Prominent figures in these types of Reformed evangelical circles in the United States were Dwight Moody, R. A. Torrey, A. J. Gordon, and A. B. Simpson.<sup>11</sup> Waldvogel argues,

Though these men did not function as a formal group or espouse a well-defined program, their remarkably similar spiritual odysseys formed a basis for a distinct understanding of the evangelical message: each ultimately accepted baptism by immersion, became convinced of Christ’s premillennial advent, espoused divine healing and . . . became associated with foreign missionary efforts, and stressed the necessity of a close relationship between the believer and the Holy Spirit. The conservative evangelical doctrinal framework into which they incorporated their particular emphases was similar to that which would later characterize the Assemblies of God [and other Pentecostals who did not adhere to Wesleyan Holiness teaching].<sup>12</sup>

Like later “Finished Work” Pentecostalism (an expression which is often used to refer to the varieties of classical Pentecostalism which do not hold to Wesleyan Holiness doctrines), these evangelicals “rejected two central tenets of the contemporary Holiness message: (1) they denied that sanctification was instantaneous, and (2) they contended that sanctification was not the baptism with the Holy Spirit.”<sup>13</sup> Instead, they saw sanctification as progressive and the baptism in the Spirit as an endowment of power for service.

In 1907, a significant number of leaders from A. B. Simpson’s Christian and Missionary Alliance who had accepted the Pentecostal experience left the movement and became leaders of newly emerging Pentecostal assemblies. Several of these, including Frank Boyd, D. W. Kerr, William Evans, and J. Roswell Flower, went on to become figures of great importance in the early years of the Assemblies of God.<sup>14</sup> Thus, right from the beginning, there were significant non-Wesleyan voices and influences among Pentecostals.

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10. Edith L. Waldvogel, “The ‘Overcoming’ Life: A Study in the Reformed Evangelical Contribution to Pentecostalism,” *Pneuma* 1, no. 1 (1979): 8.

11. William W. Menzies, “The Non-Wesleyan Origins of the Pentecostal Movement,” in *Aspects of Pentecostal-Charismatic Origins*, ed. Vinson Synan (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1975), 87–90.

12. Waldvogel, “The Overcoming Life,” 9.

13. Waldvogel, “The Overcoming Life,” 9.

14. Menzies, “Non-Wesleyan Origins,” 89; Charles W. Nienkirchen, *A. B. Simpson and the Pentecostal Movement* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 83–84.

### British Evangelical Influences on Emerging Pentecostalism

The evangelical context from which British Pentecostalism emerged had many overlapping features with the United States, but even more significant differences. While both John Wesley and John Fletcher had ministered in England, there was not a distinct Wesleyan Holiness movement in the United Kingdom comparable to that in the United States. “What is striking,” Ian Randall notes, “when the emergence of British Pentecostalism is compared with the development of Pentecostalism in North America, is the absence of strong Wesleyan holiness influences in Britain.”<sup>15</sup> In fact, although a few small organizations (such as Reader Harris’s Pentecostal League of Prayer) attempted to keep it alive, older Wesleyan sanctification teaching had largely died out in Britain—being “confined to the margins of English religious life”—by the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup>

Holiness was a very important theme among British evangelicals, but in a non-Wesleyan way. Three (at times overlapping) movements had significant influence on the emergence of Pentecostalism in the United Kingdom: the Welsh Revival tradition (flowing from Calvinistic Methodism), the Keswick Conventions and their accompanying spirituality, and Brethrenism. We will give our attention to the impact of the Welsh Revival in the next chapter, but here let us consider the other two.

#### *Keswick*

The Keswick Convention has been held in the town of Keswick in the Lake District since 1875 and was instrumental in the development of an emerging non-Wesleyan holiness movement. Keswick had much in common with and was influenced by the North American Higher Life movement; yet it remained distinctively British in character and departed from its North American counterpart theologically in a number of respects.<sup>17</sup> Keswick and the smaller “Keswick” conventions held in various parts of the country (e.g., Welsh Keswick in Llandrindod Wells, and later Portstewart Keswick in County Londonderry) and empire (e.g., the Keswick conventions organized by Andrew Murray in South Africa) were significant influences upon British evangelical life and thought. Although the main Keswick Convention was, before the First World War, a largely upper-middle-class gathering, it “drew

15. Ian M. Randall, “Old Time Power: Relationships between Pentecostalism and Evangelical Spirituality in England,” *Pneuma* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 59.

16. David Bebbington, *Holiness in Nineteenth-Century England* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 72. Even Reader Harris was, however, a member of the Church of England rather than part of a distinct Holiness denomination. Thus, even what remained of Wesleyan Holiness in the UK had significant differences from the Holiness churches in the United States.

17. James Robinson, *Pentecostal Origins: Early Pentecostalism in Ireland in the Context of the British Isles*, Studies in Evangelical History and Thought (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 10.

together a mix of British conservative evangelicals . . . and can properly be understood as representing the conservative evangelical mainstream.”<sup>18</sup> Many of Britain’s earliest Pentecostal leaders already attended the Keswick Convention or Keswick in Wales.<sup>19</sup>

Many Keswick teachers emphasized the need for a baptism in the Holy Spirit (distinct from and subsequent to conversion). A distinction was made between being “indwelt” by the Holy Spirit at conversion and being “filled” with the Holy Spirit at a later point. Unlike the American Wesleyan Holiness teachers, they did not equate the baptism of the Spirit with “entire sanctification.” Rather, Andrew Murray taught that the experience of the baptism in the Spirit subsequent to regeneration was “specially given as power for work.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, the understanding of the baptism of the Holy Spirit that spread through the influence of Keswick spirituality was that it was an empowering experience rather than a sanctifying experience.

### *Brethren Primitivism*

Yet Pentecostalism was also a primitivist movement, seeking to restore what they saw as significant aspects of New Testament church life. In Britain, Brethren assemblies were already a significant feature of evangelicalism, and they too shared this desire to restore the New Testament pattern of church life. As Pentecostalism began to emerge there were some overlaps between these two movements. Occasionally an assembly would divide into two—one Pentecostal and one Brethren (as in Penygroes). At other times what had begun as a Brethren assembly would become Pentecostal, including an assembly in Manchester (of which J. Nelson Parr was a member) that went on to become Britain’s largest Pentecostal church for many decades. For much of the twentieth century, the weekly British Pentecostal Breaking of Bread services looked almost identical to those in Brethren assemblies, except for the operation of the gifts of the Spirit (and the audible participation of women in Pentecostal worship). Ian Randall concludes that British Pentecostals were “indebted to Brethren sources for elements in their form of church life and at least in part for their simple belief in what was often called ‘the old Book.’”<sup>21</sup>

### Summary

Pentecostalism emerged through neither one event nor the influence of one significant person. Rather, a number of theological currents came together in various parts of the world, resulting in a strong anticipation of an

18. Randall, “Old Time Power,” 55.

19. E.g., Alexander Boddy, J. Nelson Parr, D. P. Williams, George Jeffreys, W. F. P. Burton. See Randall, “Old Time Power,” 59; and Chris Palmer, “Wales and Embryonic Pentecostalism,” *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* 34, no. 2 (2014): 176.

20. Andrew Murray, *The Spirit of Christ* (London: James Nisbet, 1888), 324.

21. Randall, “Old Time Power,” 60.

experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit subsequent to conversion among many different groups of evangelical Christians. While much attention has been given to the Wesleyan Holiness aspects of Pentecostal origins, large parts of Pentecostalism were not direct descendants of the Wesleyan Holiness movement. Developments within the Reformed evangelical world in North America and among British evangelicals (including Keswick spirituality and Brethren primitivism) played important roles in the emergence of much of Pentecostalism.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How did early Pentecostals like Frank Bartleman and Donald Gee understand the origins of the Pentecostal movement?
2. Why might it be a disservice to focus exclusively on events in the United States in telling the story of Pentecostal beginnings?
3. Why might so much attention have been given to the Wesleyan Holiness movement in considerations of the origins of Pentecostalism?
4. How did Reformed evangelicals in the United States contribute to the emergence of Pentecostalism?
5. Why is British evangelicalism significant for the beginnings of Pentecostalism?