

# Back to my roots: speaking in tongues for a new *ecclesia*

by **Robert Beckford**

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*Pentecostalism world-wide has been instrumental in both renewing and reinvigorating existing church structures and creating dynamic new contexts for “being church”. Here Robert Beckford draws out some important lessons from the origins of Pentecostalism in the 1906 Azusa Street revival in America.*

Not surprisingly the black political roots of Pentecostalism have been “ethnically cleansed” by white evangelical and charismatic Christian traditions. As Walter Hollenweger argues, while many contemporary charismatic and evangelical churches have their roots in the origins of Pentecostalism, most have divorced themselves from the original context of social justice.<sup>1</sup> However, everything is not rosy amongst black Pentecostals themselves because “selective amnesia” amongst many means that they are simply unaware of the socio-political motivations that produced their Christian tradition.

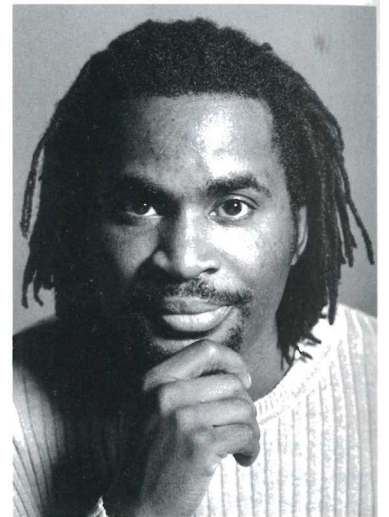
For that reason radical and black churches in Britain should re-examine the birth of Pentecostalism as a resource for a new *ecclesia*, because at the heart of the birth of Pentecostalism was an anti-oppressive focus expressed in *glossolalia* – speaking in tongues.

Although others had focused on the role of *glossolalia* as the initial sign of being filled with the Spirit<sup>2</sup>, it was the black minister of Azusa Street Church, William Seymour (1870 – 1922) who linked *glossolalia* with social transformation. A generation before the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King, Seymour realised that one’s commitment to the gospel of Christ could not result in

oppressive practices towards one’s fellow men and women. There are two areas where Seymour developed a theological praxis in and through *glossolalia*.

First, for the Azusa Street Church, where Pentecostalism was born in 1906, the gift of speaking in tongues was not just an initial sign of receiving the Holy Spirit, but also a signifier of a commitment to radical social transformation.<sup>3</sup> The gift of tongues was a continuation of a just world order established by God in the New Testament Church. Therefore, the outpouring of tongues in the small church on Azusa Street was a continuation of this order.<sup>4</sup> One could not have tongues and continue with forms of social discrimination! What we witness here is the birth of a political pneumatology. That is to say, the Azusa Street revival teaches us that the Spirit of God is a force for challenging social structures that discriminate in the world today. This is the reason why Michael Dyson has suggested speaking in tongues can be experienced as speaking a radical language of equality.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, the connection between tongues and the socio-political world has been lost as Pentecostalism spread beyond Azusa Street. However, as Alan Anderson has argued in a South African context, in some cases the



relationship between pneumatology, power and radical social change remained.<sup>6</sup> Consequently one way in which we might revive the political potential of Pentecostal pneumatology is by re-contextualising the interpretation of tongues so that it is once again connected in a more explicit way to social change. In that sense, the Church would also rediscover the gift of interpretation as the ability to translate the Spirit-inspired language of equality into the real world of colour, gender, wealth and sexual orientation.

I would suggest that if every charismatic, evangelical or black Pentecostal church in Britain viewed tongues as a language of social engagement rather than just a super-rational ecstatic experience then real spiritual power could be unleashed in Britain’s urban centres!

A second theme in the birth of Pentecostalism that is important for a new *ecclesia* is the anti-oppressive Christian praxis that emerged from the

doctrine and practice of *glossolalia*. Despite the highly segregated societies that existed across the west coast of America at the turn of the century, Seymour's church developed an anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-classist ministry. Even the seating arrangement embodied this egalitarian theme.

Ithiel Clemmons is correct when he argues that the Azusa Street Church represented a "true koinonia"<sup>7</sup> and I believe this socio-political pneumatology has profound implications for church life in Britain today. From my theological perspective the anti-racist, sexist and classist ministry was a "Dread" happening: a timely moment of freedom, empowerment and liberation. In short, the Azusa Street revival created a "Dread" pneumatology concerned with the Spirit's participation in the struggle for justice.<sup>8</sup>

A final theme that is important for ecclesiology (but not related to the phenomena of *glossolalia* integral to the Azusa Street revival) is black culture. In order to develop a holistic ministry at Azusa, Seymour utilised two aspects of black culture. On the one hand, the cultural practices and social milieu of Azusa needed to reflect the new sense of freedom, power and love experienced through the outpouring of the Spirit. On the other hand, he demonstrated that aspects of black culture could be mobilised in the quest for wholeness. For example, the early movement made use of the black music tradition. Walter Hollenweger states; "He [Seymour] affirmed his black heritage by introducing Negro spirituals and Negro music into his liturgy at a time when this music was considered inferior and unfit for Christian worship."<sup>9</sup>

However, Seymour's cultural contribution was more than the introduction of music. As Iain MacRobert demonstrates, Seymour brought to Azusa the black religious heritage. This was a religious tradition that utilised story, song, dance, polyrhythmic clapping and the swaying of bodies.<sup>10</sup> What is important here is the recognition that Christian religion is also a cultural system.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, as we say in

my tradition, "to have church" is also to experience and explore culture. Seymour demonstrates one way in which we can redeem black cultural forms so that they become vehicles for interpreting black faith within the Church.

In short, the birth of the Pentecostal movement at Azusa Street was more than the re-discovery of tongues. It was also a socio-political happening with profound effects for ecclesiology. Azusa produces a church dedicated to an anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-classist ministry through a reconnecting between the charismatic experience and social justice.

I suggest, therefore, that revisiting the Azusa Street revival is vital for all churches concerned with fighting oppression. It presents us with theological resources and paradigms that help us to create new structures of equality, justice and mutual recognition and it offers us a new ecclesiology that identifies ways in which the liberating power of God is translated into an anti-oppressive form of church life.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Walter Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide*. Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> C.F. Charles Fox Parham in Iain MacRobert, *Black Roots and White Racism of Early Pentecostalism in the USA*. London: Macmillan, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> I am suggesting that Seymour developed the doctrine of tongues beyond the theological ideas passed on to him by Charles Fox Parham. It is Parham who is credited with the development of the doctrine, but Seymour made it a socio-political reality at Azusa Street.

<sup>4</sup> Roswith Gerloff, *A Plea for British Black Theologies: The Black Church Movement in Britain in its Transatlantic Cultural and Theological Interaction*. Vol.1. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992. p. 102.

<sup>5</sup> See also the preface in Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture*. Oxford: OUP, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> A Anderson, *Pentecostal Pneumatology and African Power Concepts: Continuity and Change*. *Missionalia* 19/1, April 1990, 65-74.

<sup>7</sup> I Clemmons, *True Koinonia: Pentecostal Hopes and Historical Realities*. *Pneuma*, 3/1, 1981, 46-56.

<sup>8</sup> See, R Beckford, *Dread and*

*Pentecostal; a Political Theology for the Black Church in Britain*.

London: SPCK, 2000. p. 173ff.

<sup>9</sup> W J Hollenweger, *op. cit.* p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> Iain MacRobert, *op. cit.* p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> See, M Warren. *Seeing Through the Media: A Religious View of Communications and Cultural Analysis*. Pennsylvania: Trinity, 1997.