CHAPTER ONE

A CANADIAN AZUSA? THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE HEBDEN MISSION FOR PENTECOSTAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION

In almost any introductory text on the history of religion in the United States, one will likely discover a reference to the Azusa Street Mission as Pentecostalism’s unique and isolated point of origination. The understanding of Azusa Street as the source of all subsequent Pentecostal missions, churches, and denominations throughout the United States, and, indeed, throughout the world, is a deeply entrenched assumption among many Pentecostals, as well as historians, social-scientists, and theologians who study the movement. The historian, Joe Creech, argues that the preponderance of this ‘Azusa paradigm’ of Pentecostal origins is a result of the historical consciousness of the first generation of Pentecostal writers and eyewitnesses to the events of Azusa Street, which made it difficult for them to separate “historical events from their theological interpretations of them.” Creech explains that these early writers and eyewitnesses imposed their theology onto the historical events that they saw before them, making it extremely difficult for later scholars to differentiate between the perceptions of Azusa Street as the very powerful, yet ultimately symbolic, point of Pentecostal origins, with the actual historical beginnings of the movement. The first generation of Pentecostal historians, such as Zelma Argue, Frank Ewart, Stanley Frodsham, Donald Gee, Gloria Kulbeck,
and B.F. Lawrence, relied heavily on the accounts of the early writers and eyewitnesses, and uncritically incorporated their opinions and remarks into what became the first histories of the Pentecostal movement. These early histories, replete with the mythical Azusa paradigm of Pentecostal beginnings, served as the basis for most subsequent Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal retellings of the movement’s history—retellings that unwittingly replicated this ahistorical mythology.

One of the consequences of the wide acceptance of the myth of Azusa Street has been the tendency to ignore, or at least to marginalize, the significant influence that other early Pentecostal leaders and centres have exerted on the maturing movement. Despite the ubiquity of the myth of Azusa Street among Pentecostal adherents and scholars alike, there exists a growing body of literature that contests the monogenetical myth of Pentecostal origins. In this chapter, I support and expand on the observations of these scholars by arguing that an historically accurate understanding of the origins of the Hebden Mission in Toronto, which recognizes the mission’s impetus in the Keswick movement, and, more specifically, the healing home movement in both England and Canada, rather than the Pentecostal revivals in the United States, serves as an important corrective to the ahistorical and Americentric myth of Azusa Street. Conversely, a polygenetic theory of Pentecostal origins suggests that it is best to understand Pentecostalism as a dispersed and varied movement that owes its beginnings to a multiplicity of influences in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Christian revivalism, as opposed to a single, uniform, and guided process, as is assumed within both the Pentecostal mythology of origins, and the dominant scholarly treatments of the subject.

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