The Limits of Acculturation:  
Thomas Hampton Gourley and  
American Pentecostalism  
James R. Goff, Jr.

Throughout much of its short history, Pentecostalism has been about the business of impressing outsiders. The impulse comes from two sources. On the one hand, there is concern for the Great Commission. If Pentecostalism is God’s answer for the end time—and Pentecostals have held that tenet in common in some form or other since the movement’s beginnings—then believers should be responsible for getting the message out. Over the years, rapid growth has thus been a mark of pride for Pentecostal worshipers. Growing numbers seemed to validate their unique place in God’s plan for humanity. On the other hand, the compulsion to gloat over numbers has also resulted from a darker side—one that represented Pentecostals’ innate inferiority complex. Drawn from poorer working class stock, or from the “other side of the tracks” as first generation Pentecostals were fond of recalling, adherents joined the fold confident that they—rather than the socially prominent and powerful—were the inheritors of God’s prophetic gifts and that they would be instruments in the glorious unfolding of God’s will in the last days. It was a kind of reverse conceit; those without suddenly became the only ones with an abundance. The message functioned as a kind of “neat trick,” turning social outcasts into a spiritual elite, and the resulting zeal served the movement well as generations of Pentecostals reversed liabilities into assets and turned criticism into assurance of their spiritual wealth.¹

Yet the inferiority-turned-superiority complex was not quite as strong as Pentecostal leaders might have hoped. On second glance, the actions of Pentecostals revealed an immense concern with what the rest of the world thought and, as a result, adherents, especially second generation Pentecostals, charted a course for respectability. They

¹This theme is, of course, not a new one and most recent histories of the movement make some allowance for it. I referred to it previously in a short piece on what children experience growing up in a Pentecostal environment. See “Brother Westbrook Shouted, ‘Glory,’ and Mother Spoke in Tongues,” *Christianity Today,* 16 October 1987, 18-19.
copied the success of other Protestant Evangelicals, building denominational structures, educational institutions, and religious presses. They prided themselves on their decorum and relegated to "wild fire" any Pentecostal who tended to step out of line. The process was not a conscious one nor one which mainstream onlookers readily identified but, steadily, over the period after 1910, Pentecostals successfully went about the business of harnessing the energy that had been so chaotic in the dynamic days from Charles Parham's New Year's Day revival in Topeka in 1901 through the first three years of William Seymour's reign at Azusa. There was irony here; Pentecostal leaders recognized that the very power which created their vitality threatened to destroy their fragile organizations, yet they themselves had sprung into existence on the very premise that institutions were dangerous because they threatened the free working of God's Spirit. The result was an uncomfortable coexistence of organizers and organization resisters, with a good sprinkling of those who were arguably both at the same time. No doubt the duality is one reason why the Charismatic movement was so controversial within the older Pentecostal denominations a couple of generations later and, indeed, why Pentecostalism in general is such a fascinating historical subject.

In the midst of the story of Pentecostal denomination building, an independent—even chaotic—spirit endured both inside and outside the fold of the organizations. Unfortunately, the names and activities of key players outside the denominations are less familiar to historians if for no other reason than that they seldom left records or followings sufficient to promote their story. Yet the fact remains that it is the unacculturated who have a story to tell as well, in many ways a story which is closer to the foundations of Pentecostalism than the neatly packaged story of the successful organizers.

Born in Peru, Indiana in 1862, Thomas Hampton Gourley's early story sounds remarkably like that of many other Pentecostal pioneers. He moved several times in his youth, due to his father's at least part-time occupation as a Methodist minister. The family moved to Pawnee City, Nebraska by the early 1870s and, after a brief stay, moved on to Farragut, Iowa.² Gourley spent his young adulthood involved in several different occupations. By 1885, he was working in Topeka as a well driller; two years later he relocated to nearby Kansas City, Missouri where he formed a loose partnership with his half-brother, Will Hawkins, and the two men tried their hand alternately at carpentry and police work. With other family members, the two even speculated a bit in local real estate. A dramatic change seems to have come in 1894 when Gourley was converted under the ministry of his

²Information on Gourley's childhood is sketchy, though his father's affiliation with the Methodist Church (presumably the Methodist Episcopal Church, North) is confirmed by family records which include a newspaper obituary and by Gourley's recollections himself. See Midnight Cry (Seattle) 1 (March-April 1908): 4.