Redeemed or Destroyed: Re-evaluating the Social Dimensions of Bodily Destiny in the Thought of Charles Parham

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Introduction

Because Charles Parham is widely revered within Pentecostal circles, scholarly and ecclesiastically, as the person who articulated the theological position that speaking in tongues is the initial, physical evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, he is known by many as the founder of modern Pentecostalism. This attachment to Parham persists despite the significant evidence of his espousal of white supremacist teachings and his promulgation of other theological positions that the majority of Pentecostals rejected in Parham’s own era and in contemporary times. The ability to simultaneously embrace Parham’s role as progenitor and to reject certain aspects of his theological position rests on the assumption that the essential elements of his Pentecostal pedigree can be divorced from the more extreme aspects of his social and theological vision. This paper argues, to the contrary, that Parham’s social subscription to white supremacy in the form of Anglo-Israelism and his theological extremism in believing in the bodily annihilation of the unregenerate at Christ’s coming are inextricably connected with his understanding of the full gospel, including sanctification and the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

The Thought of Charles Parham

In a 1912 sermon about the “sources of disease,” Charles Parham proclaimed that the vitality of life obtained in sanctification foreshadows the coming glory of the final age:
God has provided a sanctified body for you, anticipating the redemption. He says: “Ye received not the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye received the spirit of adoption.” The sanctified body is the spirit of adoption. What is adoption?... Adoption permeates, not only the soul, but the body.¹

The prominence of the “sanctified body” in Parham’s writings and sermons derives from the sanctified body’s role in signaling preparation for Redemption. Sanctification represents the “earnest of redemptive glory,” Parham concluded, “and if you want to obtain that Redemption, get a sanctified body.”² Parham perceived “Redemption,” which he always capitalized, as the process at Christ’s coming when “immortality and incorruption” overwhelm human mortality and frailty, transforming human bodies into the body of Christ. The plan of God in salvation and the goal of human life culminate in this future triumph of the spirit over the flesh, but only to the extent that individual lives conform in the present to sanctification, resisting the operations of fleshly performances.³

Judging by the number of pages he wrote and the sermons he gave, nothing seemed more vital to Parham than the end of time and prophecy concerning it.⁴ The power of Christ to save, heal, and baptize with the Holy Ghost formed an incomplete picture without the fourth element in the full gospel: the hope of Christ’s Second Coming. For Parham, as for others, eschatology was an essential component in understanding God’s work and purpose in the world. In Parham’s thought, not only are the souls of human beings ordained to bliss or to hell, but also the human bodies of men and women play an equally significant role in humanity’s final drama. Indeed, Parham’s vision of the culmination of human history is rife with corporeal images. These bodies, moreover, were particularly racialized and politicized in his thinking. The saved, who tended to be white, to embrace sanctification, and to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit, will enter eternity through Redemption, the immortalization and perfection of the human body. The damned have no eternity; rather, they will be utterly destroyed, both soul and body. Most striking, perhaps, was that this racialized and political conception of the redeemed and the damned pervaded Parham’s theology of the past, the present, and the future.

² Ibid., 5.
³ Ibid., 4.
⁴ In both Voice Crying in the Wilderness and The Everlasting Gospel, more than half of the chapters detailed eschatological events.