The Promises and Perils of the Azusa Street Myth

Accompanied by religious fervor and supernatural manifestations, the outpouring of the Spirit in Los Angeles at the beginning of the twentieth century prompted social reconstructions within the Azusa Street Mission that produced an unprecedented level of equality and inclusion, cutting across lines of race, gender, class, and nationality. The reception of these Azusa testimonies have become more than mere factual accounts; they represent an ideal, hence Walter Hollenweger’s now famous assessment that the first decade following Azusa represents the heart rather than the infancy of the movement. The narrative of the Azusa Street revival plays a prominent and mythical role for Pentecostals and Charismatics, notwithstanding the plurality of historical events that occurred during early years of the pentecostal movement.

As many historians have noted, the social reforms of Azusa were short lived. Cultural pressures of racism, sexism, classism, and nationalism impinged on the community from both secular sources and (unfortunately) from their fellow Pentecostals. The failure to maintain this newfound diversity resulted in racial segregation, the marginalization of women, and a populist xenophobia and suspicion of multiculturalism, all of which continue to plague the global movement. However significant the countercultural impulses of Azusa may have been, its brevity begs the question: What are the lasting effects of the Azusa Street myth? In this editorial, myth is being used as a double entendre—

both in the popular sense as a widely held though false belief, and in the traditional sense as a communal story that continually provides meaning, shapes identity, and inspires ethical conduct.

Following the hermeneutical theory of Paul Ricoeur, Jean-Daniel Plüss defines myth as “a traditional story in the experience of time, with a plot that leads to an unexpected reversal of fortune and a surplus of meaning, thus providing people with grounds for ritual action as well as ethical commitment.” In the case of Azusa, the social reconstructions were initially either condemned or simply ignored by the publications of the predominantly white groups. Charles Parham, despite his openly racist views, dominates many historical accounts of the origins of Pentecostalism. Later explanations that acknowledge and even celebrate Azusa’s social reconstructions have failed to affect the movement’s social structures. The dissolving of the all-white Pentecostal Fellowship of North America, dubbed the “Memphis Miracle,” held momentary promise for substantial change, though the replacement organization, Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches of North America, was unable to address the underlying causes of the original segregation, owing in large part to a lack of concern for racial or gender justice among the populist majority of the white denominations.

The ongoing divisions within the movement are evident, and they mirror identical divisions in society. Although the global numerical growth and multicultural demographics of pentecostal and charismatic Christianity are often celebrated by denominational ecclesiarchs, the critical reflection needed to offer a nuanced assessment of the deep social fissures remain. It may be objectively true that Azusa Street and Memphis exhibited temporary social reconstruction, though a positivist historical account reduces these narratives of social reconstruction from myth to fairy tales. In other words, “A myth is not simply to be explained (as the Modernists or the literalists would have it)” because “it provides a form of divine truth in a worldly context which reaches

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