Vinson Synan and Daniel Woods


In 1972, in his seminal work *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement*, Vinson Synan introduced the English-speaking Christian world to the illusive figure of Benjamin Hardin Irwin, the founder and leader of the Fire-Baptized Holiness Church, from which sprang the contemporary denomination, the International Pentecostal Holiness Church. While earlier authors, who chronicled the beginnings of the Pentecostal Movement in the United States, mentioned Irwin, they were all short on biographical details. With the release of *Fire-Baptized* many mysteries surrounding Irwin’s early and later life have been revealed.

In the first section of the book, Synan, who is presently a scholar-in-residence at Oral Roberts University, weaves the story of Irwin’s birth in Missouri, the years of his youth in Nebraska and his family’s membership and participation in the Primitive or Old Baptist Church. These strict Calvinists separated from their fellow Baptists over the issue of sending forth missionaries to proclaim the Gospel. So strong was the Primitive Baptist belief in the doctrine of *double predestination* that they felt it was a waste of time, and money, to send out missionaries when those who were predestined to be *saved* would be saved regardless of whether they heard the Gospel or not, and sinners were predestined to hell no matter how many times they heard the same proclamation. Synan, quoting from Irwin’s own writings, shows how he despaired of his own soul’s salvation and determined to live as an infidel, giving himself to excessive drinking, cheating, lying, and violent abuse of his wife and children.

However, in April of 1872, Irwin testifies to being converted in a Primitive Baptist Church, describing the event in elaborate and emotionally charged language, that would become a hallmark of his future writing, and preaching. Synan records Irwin’s evolution from Primitive Baptist to sanctified Methodist, his disenchantment with the Methodist Episcopal Church, and his later affiliation with the Wesleyan Methodists. Synan asserts that it was Irwin’s association with the Wesleyans that provided him with a platform and a base from which he launched his preaching ministry.

Appealing to Donald Dayton’s work, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*, Synan shows that Irwin was influenced by currents taking place at that time in the wider Holiness Movement. The proliferation of *Pentecostal* language must have caught Irwin’s intense imagination and he made ample use of it in his preaching ministry. This eventually led to his controversial teaching of the *Fire-Baptized* experience, subsequent to being saved and sanctified, or what
was named by Irwin’s detractors the “Third-Blessing Heresy.” Making use of articles published in the Southern Holiness periodical, *The Way of Faith*, Synan traces the spread of Irwin’s Fire-Baptized teaching and experience proliferated throughout the Midwest and South. Irwin received invitations to preach in the North and Canada, gaining followers wherever he went. In order to consolidate this new movement, Irwin organized “Fire-Baptized Holiness Associations” in several states and regions, which eventually evolved into a denomination overseen by Irwin.

Synan adeptly shows that Irwin had a penchant for the theatrical and the bizarre, and therefore it is not surprising that after the initial sensationalism of the Fire-Baptism something even more spectacular needed to happen. Therefore, as Irwin’s movement grew so did the “baptisms” he espoused. To the Baptism of Fire was added the baptisms of “Dynamite, Lyddite and Oxidite,” each one more powerful than before. Irwin preached it, claimed he personally experienced it and invited others to also receive, and many others also claimed these baptisms. Men who would figure prominently in the formation of the Pentecostal Movement, such as J.H. King, joined themselves to Irwin and became leaders in the Fire-Baptized Holiness Church. However, at the height of Irwin’s popularity, a “Thunderclap”, as Synan describes it, took place. Irwin was spotted in Nebraska exiting a saloon, smoking a cigar. This news, released in the pages of several Holiness periodicals in the U.S., effectively ended Irwin’s ministry. His meteoric rise was at an end. In a style that only Vinson Synan could write, he records the results of Irwin’s moral failure on the Fire-Baptized Holiness Church, his succession by Joseph H. King and the final mergers that led to the formation of the Pentecostal Holiness Church. The greatest surprises of *Fire-Baptized* is Synan’s revelations of Irwin’s life after he was ousted from the denomination he founded and led, as well the macabre activities of one of his adult sons. Irwin’s later years, hidden in the shadows for decades, have been for the first time, uncovered in this work, and are, in many ways, more bizarre than the years he was barnstorming the nation promoting his sensational and multiple baptisms.

The second part of this work, was expertly compiled and edited by Daniel Woods. An anthology of selected writings by Irwin from his personal correspondence, as well as several articles he penned and were published in different Holiness periodical in circulation at that time, perfectly complements the first section. Woods holds a PhD in History from the University of Mississippi and is, like Synan, an ordained minister in the Pentecostal Holiness Church. Synan and Woods have given us in this volume, a glimpse into the obviously conflicted heart and mind of a man who while a forerunner in proclaiming the theological and experiential foundations of the Pentecostal Movement,