The Canadian “Azusa”: The Hebden Mission in Toronto

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Enthusiastic proponents of Pentecostalism at the Apostolic Faith Mission in 1906 in Los Angeles referred to that city as “the American Jerusalem.” A similar appellation could be given to the city of Toronto, Ontario, where a powerful visitation of God began late in the same year. For decades, Canadian Pentecostals have considered Robert E. McAlister, one of the founders of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, to have been the first Canadian to have received the Baptism in the Spirit and spoken in tongues in the twentieth century. A careful examination of the documents, however, has revealed that the first person to have experienced this Baptism, accompanied by tongues-speaking, was Mrs. James (Ellen) Hebden. There remains one faint possibility that another Canadian had the Pentecostal experience at an earlier date, for John Loney, of Snowflake, Manitoba, wrote to William Seymour in 1906,

I am in sympathy with your work, am baptized with the Holy Ghost and fire, and have received the gift of some as yet unknown tongue or tongues. It first came two years ago, and is proving more distinct and real. Believe God is preparing me for some special work in some part of His vineyard.

This account was reprinted in Seymour’s Apostolic Faith paper in December, 1906. There is no way of ascertaining whether Mr. Loney was a Canadian or a recent American emigrant. Snowflake is near the U.S. border, and he may have been one of the many thousands, who, at the turn of the century, came north to take up the offer of free homesteads on the Canadian prairies. His name does not appear in any available records of Canadian Pentecostalism. If he was indeed a Canadian citizen, then his experience of the Spirit’s Infilling would antedate that of all other known Canadians and even that of Seymour and the “Azusa saints.” After a lapse of some eighty years, it is unlikely that this problem can ever be solved, and it would seem safe to claim Mrs. Hebden as the first Canadian recipient of the Baptism in this century. Support for this view has come from an account of the Hebden Mission by an eye-witness to the early establishment of Pentecostalism in Toronto.

The Reverend George C. Slager was converted to Christ in the Hebden Mission in the summer of 1908, just over a year after Mrs. Hebden’s baptism in the Spirit. He saw many others saved, filled
with the Spirit and supernaturally healed in the meetings that seemed to go on from morning to midnight every day. The Reverend and Mrs. Slager were familiar with other newly-established Pentecostal missions in the city and also attended the first Pentecostal Convention in Canada, in Toronto during the autumn of 1908. Slager later wrote that “Mrs. Hebden was the first to receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit accompanied by the initial evidence of speaking in other tongues... in fact, they claimed that she was the first to receive this experience in Toronto.”

The Mission on Queen Street East became a focal point for the fledgling Pentecostal movement in Canada and Mrs. Hebden was for some time the dominant personality in the Toronto work. She had been converted at the age of fifteen in England and, after marriage to James Hebden, a contractor, came to Canada. In May of 1904 they rented a three-story building in Toronto and opened a combined Rescue Mission-Faith Healing Home. They reserved the top floor for their private apartment. Despite some initial successes in ministry, Ellen Hebden felt a lack of power in praying for the sick and began to intercede with God for more love and more faith. She was a woman of strong conviction and was, according to contemporaries, much the better preacher in the family. On November 17, 1906, while engaged in prayer, she sensed the Spirit in an unusual way. Her account of what followed was published later in her first magazine, The Promise, in May, 1907. Later, she sent a similar account to Seymour in Los Angeles, who reprinted it in The Apostolic Faith. Mrs. Hebden’s report was that, without any expectation of such an ecstatic experience:

Suddenly, the Holy Ghost fell upon me, and I exclaimed aloud, “Oh Jesus! Thou art a real, living person! Thou art lovely beyond description!” My whole being seemed to be filled with praise and adoration such as I had never realized before. ... I was praising Jesus all the time, and yet it did not appear to be me, but the power within that was praising Him. ... my hands were raised by the power of God and pressed tightly into my right cheek. ... I said to the Lord, “What does this mean?”; and a very quiet, yet distinct, voice said “Tongues.” I said “No, Lord, not Tongues.” Then followed a moment of deathlike stillness, when the voice again uttered the word “Tongues.” This time I felt afraid of grieving the Lord and I said “Tongues, or anything that will please Thee and bring glory to Thy Name!” One unknown word was repeated several times and I thought that must be Tongues. ... On Monday morning (Nov. 19th) I arose again to spend the day with the Lord. I waited patiently for Him. At noon I took the word of God, read a portion of it and spread it upon the floor. I