

The Historic Legacy of Zion's Christian Assembly In the Beginning...



Christian Assembly of Zion City, IL holds an unsung place of distinction in the history of the early Pentecostal movement of the last century. Its humble beginnings were birthed in the womb of Pentecostal revival, tried in the fires of persecution, and matured into an established launch pad for evangelists, missionaries, and District and national leaders, both within the Assemblies of God, and into the Pentecostal world in general.

Unlike most Pentecostal churches worldwide, our beginnings did not trace back to the Azusa revival, but leaders from that revival did fan the flames, sparked a few months before by the father of the modern Pentecostal movement, Charles Fox Parham.

Our story begins at the turn of the twentieth century with a visionary, if not controversial pastor, evangelist, and leader named John Alexander Dowie. Dowie, who was one of the first well-known figures to preach the healing ministry of Jesus Christ, bought land, and established the town of Zion City for the exclusive use of his following of several thousands. His vision was to make Zion the first of many cities worldwide, which would be ruled as a theocracy, completely owned, and governed by the Christian Catholic Church he founded. His vision was to create a Christian Utopia, which would be the model for sending the message of the restoration of apostolic power to the ends of the earth. His message of holiness, divine healing and expectancy for the return of apostolic power to the church laid fertile soil for the Pentecostal message. The message of apostolic renewal Dowie failed to complete by physical means, finally found fulfillment in the message of Pentecost birthed during the last months of his life.

Charles Parham is widely regarded as the father of the Pentecostal movement in the twentieth century. In his bible school in Topeka Kansas, the first reports of the baptism with the Holy Spirit occurred at a watch night service in the first hours of 1901.

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By early 1906, he was teaching a bible school in Texas, where he met William Seymour, who, after learning of the Pentecostal message, carried it to what became the Azusa Street revival, from which the message of Pentecost spread quickly to the rest of the world. In July 1906, Seymour invited his mentor, Parham to help with the revival at in Los Angeles at Azusa St.

In September, Parham agreed to come, but then decided to instead answer the invitation of a small prayer group from Zion City. Reportedly, a woman named Mrs. Waldron had received the baptism with the Holy Spirit in one of Parham's meetings in Kansas in 1903, and subsequently moved to Zion in 1904 where she led her sister to the baptism. When the sister began to speak with tongues, it created a controversy resulting in Mrs. Waldron not being allowed to hold any more prayer meetings. Mrs. Waldron's family was pressured to the point of moving away from Zion under Dr. Dowie. She had tried unsuccessfully to get the leadership at Christian Catholic Church to invite Parham for special meetings. Still, a small prayer group of five men, who met at the Elijah Hospice Hotel in the center of town, having heard of the Azusa revival, invited Parham to hold meetings there, the hotel manager, George A. Rogers, apparently being part of the group. Parham arrived in Zion City on Thursday Sept. 20, 1906 and immediately held the first "quietly planned" meeting in one of the rooms provided Mr. Rogers. The meetings increased to three per day, and by the end of the first week, The Daily Sun of Waukegan reported that several hundred were attending. Wilbur Glen Voliva, Dowie's successor as overseer of the Christian Catholic Church, was not pleased that Parham was winning "some of the prominent elders" of Zion. Voliva felt that Parham was invading his city and had no right to hold meetings. The tension between the two was great; Voliva calling Parham the "latest religious vagabond" in the Church's newspaper The Leaves of Healing and in the December 1, 1906 edition predicted, "The whole thing will soon come to naught..."

Indeed Voliva tried to do just that, he first prohibited the meetings in the hotel, and blocked their attempts to rent the town's other public facilities, including the school and the Christian Catholic Church's own sanctuary, the Shiloh Tabernacle. Parham countered by

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holding the meetings in the home of a Mrs. Ames, and then in at least five other residences of his sympathizers, including the home of F.F. Bosworth. Crowds spilled onto the porches and into the streets. Parham held nightly services, one after another in each of the houses, traveling from one to the next by horse and buggy. One report tells of Mr. John Lang, who owned and drove the buggy for Parham, whose horse's harness was cut, resulting in the spirited horse maiming itself. Another told of a Parham follower who was warned supernaturally that the burrs had been removed from the buggy wheels by an enemy. Upon inspection, it proved to be true.

Despite opposition, the revival continued to grow. The Daily Gazette reported on October 15 that Parham's followers numbered two hundred. Two days later, having preaching for some weeks, several began to be baptized with the Spirit. Among those receiving that night were three persons of interest. Marie E. Burgess, who later pastored with her husband the Glad Tidings Tabernacle in New York City, was one, Miss Jean Campbell, who later married L. C. Hall in Zion in 1910, who then went on to do a great evangelistic work, after being an elder at Christian Assembly for a time was another, and thirdly F. F. Bosworth. The Bosworth family attended Christian Assembly, including F. F.'s brother B. B. Bosworth. F. F. Bosworth almost immediately went on to great ministry, eventually preaching to over seventy-five thousand in one meeting, and winning an estimated one million souls to the kingdom over his life span. Several of those who began to join Parham's ranks were prominent in Dowie's regime. F.F. Bosworth was the leader of the acclaimed Zion City Band, and F. A. Graves was one of Dowie's ordained Elders. By late October, however, with the revival in full swing, Parham finally left for Los Angeles to visit the Azusa Street revival. But the revival did not end with Parham's absence. "Parhamites" as the papers now called them, continued to meet together and by November 15, 1906 The Daily Sun reported 300 in only one of the house meetings. In response to the growth, Voliva began an aggressive campaign against Parham's followers. Billboards posted at the city limits gave scathing references to the "porch-climbers" and the "monkey house", evidently referring to the emotional worship services at the meetings. "These buzzers and buzzards" would be the recipients of Voliva's wrath saying, "The war is on red hot and will be waged day and night

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until every traitor goes to his own place!" Followers of Parham were told to "choose either me or this intruder who has stolen into our church." Those who chose to follow Parham's teaching were excommunicated from the Christian Catholic Church, and isolated socially from other members in good standing. Since the Church owned or controlled all of the businesses in the city, this would mean the Pentecostals would lose their jobs as well.

During all of this, the group continued to convert others from the mother church to the new Pentecostal fellowship. They continued to grow to the extent that the leadership of the group decided to put up a large tent near the north-west corner of 27th St. and Elizabeth St. on December 15, 1906, only a couple of blocks from the center of town. Tensions continued and at one point, opposition said that apparently the wind "blew down" the tent. John G. Lake, one of Dowie's deacons, was won over during the tense holiday season. Lake would go on to be a well-known evangelist and missionary to South Africa.

Parham returned to Zion in late December just in time to preach the watch night service on December 31, 1906. He found that the group of Pentecostals he left had continued to grow on their own. The temperature was cold, so the tent was warmed by seven coal-burning stoves. He preached for two hours on the baptism with the Holy Ghost to a capacity crowd of over two thousand. How many of these were the faithful core of converted Pentecostals, and how many were seekers, or just curious onlookers is speculation, but the homogenized group that began in September appears to have begun to solidify.

After preaching nightly for two weeks while teaching an impromptu Bible school, Parham left to preach in other churches with ties to the Christian Catholic Church of Zion. He left an established Pentecostal work, which continued to meet together until they later began to call themselves Christian Assembly.

No records survive to verify exactly who was considered the first permanent pastor of the group after Parham left, but by far, the most prominent figure of the era, and indeed for

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years to come, was Frederick Arthur Graves. F.A. Graves was a traveling evangelist in the 1800s whose wife was miraculously healed after being prayed for by Dowie. Graves joined Dowie's ministry team, and was ordained by him as an Elder in 1899. Graves often played music on his portable organ, and sang and wrote music all of his life. He is perhaps best known for the hymns "Honey in the Rock" and "He Was Nailed to the Cross for Me." Henry C. McNabb, an early member of Christian Assembly, remembers Graves as being the first pastor of the church, pastoring "from 1907 to about 1912." Elder Graves, as he was known may have shepherded the group during the beginning years, and is referred to as a former pastor of the church in a few narratives recalled by Members decades later. Elder Graves left a legacy through his children as well. Arthur Graves became a pastor and the president of Southeastern Bible College in Lakeland Florida, one of the Assemblies of God's major training schools. Carl Graves was a missionary to Sri Lanka and a pastor; Irene Graves married Myer Pearlman, writer and Bible teacher at Central Bible Institute in Springfield.

By mid 1907 the city of Zion was in receivership by court order, following a power struggle by Dowie and Voliva. At some point in the early part of 1907, the receiver for the court ordered that Voliva's church would have to vacate their building, Shiloh Tabernacle, and that the Pentecostal church could meet there on alternating Sundays, and weeknights. This arrangement may have become more permanent later in the year, according to a local newspaper article dated Jan. 24, 1908 which gives the winter service schedule, indicating that Sunday morning at 10:30 and Tuesday evening at 7:30 were the primary rallying points during the cold months for the Assembly, and that cottage meetings were being held throughout the city. Voliva's Church, at least temporarily, was exiled to a tent, and then the College building, while his declared enemies occupied his sanctuary on Sunday mornings.

Henry McNabb further recalls that John G. Lake and Tom Hezmalhalch were preaching services at Christian Assembly in 1907, apparently as evangelists. "Brother Tom," as he was known by, left Azusa St. to start a Pentecostal work in Indianapolis, and according to Dr. Larry Martin, in his book The Life and Ministry of William J. Seymour, he accompanied

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Seymour to Zion in June of 1907 where they ministered together. This seems to indicate that Seymour preached at Christian Assembly, since there were no other Pentecostal works in Zion in 1907. Further, Seymour gives personal testimony of a glowing report from Zion, where he mentions "Brother Tom" and also mentions believers receiving the baptism "in the pews." The only pews in Zion City in 1907 were at the Methodist Church, across town, which had no apparent connection with Pentecostalism at all, and also at Shiloh Tabernacle, where Christian Assembly Pentecostals were already meeting for some time by January of 1908.

About the same time Seymour left, Elder F. A. Graves, along with Jean Campbell and Marie Burgess was invited by another of the six original Dowie Elders, Rev. William Hamner Piper, to Stone Church in Chicago to preach the message of Pentecost to his people which he did on June 30, 1907. Piper had started the church on Dec. 9 1906 after Dowie's fall from power. Stone Church went on to publish the Later Rain Evangel of early Pentecostal fame, and then hosted the second general council of the Assemblies of God. Stone Church's proximity to the main transcontinental railway connections made it of great and continuing influence for years to come in the Pentecostal movement.

Fred Vogler, who's family moved to Zion about a year before Parham arrived, testified that he was interested in the Pentecostal work in Zion, but chose not to join them because he was "not willing to pay the cost" of persecution from others, according to the book Out of Zion. Finally, on July 8, 1907 he gave in to all God had for him, joined with the Pentecostals, and began to minister to young people who had been Spirit Baptized, but had since begun to grow cold in their walk with God. By fall, Vogler, in his late teens, and a small group from the Pentecostal fellowship, began a Monday night prayer meeting for the youth, which went on for some weeks or more. The result was that a large group of youth began to catch fire for God. The youth, after Sunday services, apparently in Shiloh Tabernacle, would go to Kenosha, Wisconsin, to hold an afternoon service and street meeting.

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"Later five of us sponsored a young people's revival in the large tabernacle at Zion. The young people were in charge of the entire service, including the preaching." The young people would pray before each nightly service to decide which of them would preach the sermon that night. "Scores of people were saved, and received the Baptism," and the revival lasted for five weeks. A great number of the youth went on to serve the Lord as evangelists, pastors and missionaries, some of whom were martyred for their faith. Some went on to marry some of the early Assemblies of God leaders such as E.N. Bell, and J. Roswell Flower.

Following the youth revival, and perhaps as a result of it, Rev. William F. Manley was invited to Zion to preach at Shiloh Tabernacle. Manley was an evangelist who held meetings only a block from the house that the Azusa St. revival started at on Bonnie Brae Street. He had attended the revival on at least more than one occasion, planted a church there, and carried its message on to Oakland California, and finally across the U.S. His publication Household of God reported in November 1907 edition that he had open dates for November 1907 through February of 1908. He appears to have filled these dates at the invitation of the Pentecostal work meeting at Shiloh Tabernacle. On January 24, 1908, a newspaper article describes the new winter service schedule for "Christian Assembly." The article goes on to mention the "usual" Sunday morning service meeting in the main auditorium of Shiloh Tabernacle, where Rev. Manley would be preaching, along with a Tuesday night meeting, and numerous cottage meetings throughout the city. "The attendance since Mr. Manley came to the city has been steadily increasing, and the preaching has been with great power and blessing," according to the article. A Chicago pastor, John Sinclair, ordained later with the Assemblies of God, indicates that he was ordained by Manley on February 26, 1908. Manley may have stayed longer, but by September 1908 he was already on the evangelistic trail again.

Evidently, it was under Manley's leadership, or shortly before, that the Pentecostal fellowship first began to use the name "Christian Assembly." He appears to have been considered the pastor of the congregation, Vogler obtaining Manley's support to go on into

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evangelistic ministry instead of seeking the approval of any other leader in the fellowship. F.A. Graves, or others may have shepherded the group up to that point, but Manley appears to have taken the reigns of leadership of the newly named assembly, at least for the few months he was there. Ultimately, Manley returned to his normal duties of evangelism, and Vogler went on to evangelism with Brother Flower, and then to become Home Missions Director and Assistant General Superintendent of the Assemblies of God from 1937-1951.