2011


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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://ir.una.edu/nahr/vol1/iss1/11

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Brandon Blaylock

“I believe in union because I know there will be no creeds in heaven, and why not union on earth? I agree with Brother Spurling.”

“O, brother, if you now refrain
You are sure to miss the ‘latter rain;’
Be Sure you’ve counted all the cost
and got your blessed Pentecost!”

On Thursday August 19, 1886 a small group of Christians dedicated to holiness gathered together for the first time. Their stated purpose was to “preach primitive church Holiness and provide for reform and revival of the Churches.” Led by Missionary Baptist minister Richard Spurling and his son R. G. Spurling, this group met at the Barney Creek meeting house in Monroe County, TN. After a few points of order were deliberated and a call for membership was commenced, they chose the *Christian Union* as the name for their fledgling group. The name they chose was a representation of the high hopes that they had for group. They wished to be a unifying body under which all Christians could unite in Christ. “All denominations know and fellowship each other by their creed or confession of faith,”

4 Although both Spurlings are “Richard Spurling,” when there is the possibility of confusion, I will refer to the elder as Richard Spurling and the younger as R. G. Spurling as this appears to be consistent with how they are identified throughout the literature. It is also worth noting that the Elder Spurling died shortly after the initial formative meetings of the Christian Union. Thus, any reference to a Spurling after 1891 is to the son, R. G. Spurling.
wrote Spurling, “instead of the way Jesus said for men to know his disciples. By […] love one to another.”⁵ This sums up the goal of the Christian Union quite succinctly. There was no desire for the creation of a denomination, only a union of believers. Regardless of the elder Spurling’s misgivings regarding denominational strictures, the humble beginnings would spring forth numerous⁶ Pentecostal-holiness denominations spanning the globe and claiming adherents numbering in the millions. How this transition from a radical holiness, anti-denominational body to multiple Pentecostal denominations occurred is the subject of the present investigation.⁷

In describing this period, it is common to categorize the holiness movement along two mutually exclusive lines: the “stay-inners” and the “come-outers.” These two phrases are used to quickly identify the separatist leanings, and often the degree of the radicalization, of various holiness groups in the late nineteenth century. For the early Appalachian holiness community, which was led by the Spurlings, these standard identifiers failed to adequately describe their unique situation. Richard Spurling and his son both saw not the establishment of a denomination

⁶ The Church of God (Cleveland, TN), the (Original) Church of God, Church of God with Signs Following, Church of God of Prophecy, Church of God House of Prayer, Church of God (Huntsville), The Church of God over which Bishop James C. Nabors is General Overseer, The Church of God for All Nations, The Church of God (Jerusalem Acres), and Church of God (Charleston) all claim as their heritage the Christian Union meetings of 1886.
⁷ For a broad overview of the history of the Church of God from an insider’s perspective, one should consult Like a Mighty Army by Dr. Charles Conn. This work is not an objective account of events and makes no effort to present itself as such; however, Dr. Conn’s use of primary sources and first hand interviews are extensive and the book provides a good introduction to the history of the denomination. For a more critical account of the early days of the church read R. G. Robins’ A.J. Tomlinson: Plainfolk Moderist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) which is an indispensable resource for anyone interested in the life of Tomlinson, the early Church of God, or the Radical Holiness/early Pentecostal movements in general. For a more broad examination of the early Pentecostal movement see Nils Bloch-Hoell, The Pentecostal Movement (New York: Humanities Press, 1964.); Harvey Cox, Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1995); and Grant Wacker, Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).
as their primary goal, but rather unity and “reformation” as their objective. However, after the fanaticism of their revivalistic methods and their intense criticism of landmarkism became an annoyance to the local congregation, they were no longer welcome in their Baptist church. Regarding these events, Spurling writes, “I failed to accept all of their creed [...]. They demanded my license which I readily gave up [...] Now I must forever quit preaching or leave my church, so I left them [...] I was turned out of what I once thought was Christ’s only true church.” They did not leave willingly; they were forced out and their goal was not to start something new; thus, the first members of the Christian Union were both puritan and pilgrim. Perhaps it was their Baptist expulsion -combined with their collective aversion to denominationalism- that contributed to a third holiness category: “stay-outers.”

The path that these men and their fledgling group took toward becoming a Pentecostal denomination is both complicated and unique. The Church of God’s official history claims that the first tongues-speaking experience related to the Church of God occurred in Cherokee County, North Carolina at a revival led by three Baptist Evangelists and a Spurling follower, W. F. Bryant, in 1896. After the revival began, Spurling and his congregation from the Christian Union merged with this group in Cherokee County. This event occurred ten years prior to William Seymour’s Azusa Street revivals that propelled Pentecostal practice into a global phenomenon. There is no evidence, however, of this being a universal manifestation among the Christian Union members. There is also no evidence that the events or experiences of Cherokee County were

8 R.G. Spurling, The Lost Link, 1.
seen in terms of the modern Pentecostal belief in glossolalia as the “initial evidence of the Baptism of the Holy Ghost.” This unique Pentecostal tenet appears to have as its origin the revival led by Charles Fox Parham in Topeka, Kansas that occurred at the beginning of the year 1901.\footnote{Nils Bloch-Hoell, The Pentecostal Movement (New York: Humanities Press, 1964), 18.} The influence of these early Camp Creek manifestations seems to be limited as well to the people present at the local meetings during the revivals. Homer Tomlinson, son of early Church of God Patriarch A. J. Tomlinson, asserts that many people, including Charles Parham, traveled to witness the events at Camp Creek. He further asserts that it was this trip that initially peaked Parham’s interest in the tongues movement.\footnote{A. J. Tomlinson, Diary of A. J. Tomlinson, ed. Homer Tomlinson (Queens Village, NY: Church of God, 1949), 1:25.} However, this seems unlikely for two reasons. First, there is no other record of such influence, and second, Homer Tomlinson was not particularly reliable or even sane and, as such, his credibility is questionable. An example of Homer Tomlinson’s mental instability can be demonstrated by his visit to Russia in 1958. Sitting in Red Square, dressed in long Chinese garments, he declared himself “King of Russia” and announced that he was running for president of the United States.\footnote{U. S. Sect Leader Sitting in Red Square Proclaims Himself the King of Russia. Special to The New York Times. New York Times (1923-Current file); Jul 13, 1958; ProQuest Historical Newspapers New York Times (1851-2007) w/ Index (1851-1993), 29.} Later, he made a similar declaration on the United States’ capitol steps- this time wearing a crown and robe and declaring himself King of the World.\footnote{Capitol Ousts ‘King of World’ New York Times (1923-Current file); Aug 9, 1958; ProQuest Historical Newspapers New York Times (1851-2007) w/ Index (1851-1993), 11.}

A further reason that these events of glossolalia appear to have been limited in influence is because the leaders, namely R. G. Spurling and elder William F. Bryant, failed to mention them in any documentation created contemporaneously to the events. There are extensive references
to “Holy Ghost Baptism” throughout The Way, the monthly newsletter of their Holiness Church, but no references to speaking in tongues. The newsletter focused almost exclusively on sanctification and holiness. The oldest surviving references to the events of Cherokee County come from A. J. Tomlinson and were all written after 1908. This is not to argue that the tongues speaking events did not take place, only to point out that they were not of the same character as the events that took place later in Kansas or California. Concrete documentation of events that included speaking in tongues did not appear until the Church of God was an established denomination with clear doctrinal commitments. It is possible that speaking in tongues is alluded to in publications of the Christian Union. For example, an article in The Way, published in September 1905, on “Receiving the Holy Ghost,” contains a quote from chapter 2 that states: “And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire.” The article goes on to talk of the Holy Ghost “falling” on believers. One can also find an account of someone who “failed to get the blessing.” However, this most likely referred to a sanctification experience like those spoken of by Charles Finney. This analysis is corroborated by another article that states that “receiving of the Holy Ghost […] makes us Holy or sanctifies us.”

This is certainly not the same theology that was taught by Parham or Seymour. It appears that reading the statements from The Way as referring to modern Pentecostal theology or experience is anachronistic for a variety of reasons.

Failure to mention speaking in tongues, specifically, stands out as the most convincing reason to believe that A. J. Tomlinson and

15 In 1902 the Bryant’s church took the name the Holiness Church at Camp Creek.
M. S. Lemons, co-editors of *The Way*, were not referring to the modern Pentecostal conception of Holy Ghost baptism, but the late nineteenth century radical holiness doctrine of a sanctification experience. It is much more likely that the doctrine of the Holy Ghost espoused by the Christian Union was in line with that of W. B. Godbey who wrote of the “fires of the Holy Ghost” falling on him, “filling and flooding [his] soul and transforming [him] into a cyclone.”\(^{18}\) Godbey’s descriptions are remarkably similar to the terminology used in *The Way*. Godbey was no friend to the Pentecostal movement, and his experiences are decidedly holiness in nature, not Pentecostal.

One explanation that could be offered for why Lemons and Tomlinson failed to explicitly mention speaking in tongues in their publication could be that the publication was going out to a wider audience than those who were participating in the local congregations and revivals. Lemons and Tomlinson might have decided that there was no benefit in alienating potential subscribers- especially due to the fact that a topic as controversial as tongues was best avoided for the time- particularly since there was still no firm doctrinal commitment in the Christian Union. However, this seems less likely when *The Way* is compared to later Church of God publications like *Faithful Standard*, also published by A. J. Tomlinson, which makes no effort to hide the evident Pentecostal-oriented nature of the organization.

One of the more convincing items that indicates that the Holiness Church did not view the tongues experience of 1896 in the same way that it came to be viewed after Azusa Street is a half-page promotional notice printed in the August 1905 issue of *The Way*. The notice is promoting

a revival to be held at Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Cleveland, Tennessee. The relevant portion reads, “We expect the Holy Spirit to be honored and to have full control [sic], but special care will be taken to avoid all fanaticism.” The implication is clear, and it seems unlikely that the newsletter of a group that actively participated in the sort of “fanaticism” being denounced would have printed a promotional notice that amounts to a repudiation of their own techniques.

The path taken toward a modern tongues-speaking movement is one that first involves a parallel movement toward denominational structure. In the early history of the Church of God, there are two very distinct, almost conflicting movements. The first discernible movement is that of the cofounder, R. G. Spurling and William F. Bryant. As discussed earlier, Spurling was decidedly anti-denominational, and he was just as ardently anti-creedal. He was, at least nominally, Calvinistic in theology. He was a Restorationist who sought to reform and restore the church to what it had been in the New Testament. For membership in the Christian Union, he required nothing but an affirmation that every original member took; namely that they “be free from all men made creeds and traditions, and are willing to take the New Testament, or the law of Christ, for [their] only rule of faith and practice.” One wonders if Spurling was ever challenged on the intrinsically self-defeating and contradictory nature of an anti-creedal creed. Regardless, this attitude was dominant in the early Christian Union. Further, both Spurling and Bryant openly advocated Christian participation in war. Most importantly, Spurling had no ambition toward starting or administering a movement of any type. When

the opportunity presented itself, he and Bryant were eager to leave the leadership of the Church in the care of others so they could devote all of their time to Evangelism. Virtually every one of these items is points of departure for the man that would replace Spurling as the Pastor of the Camp Creek congregation, Ambrose Jessup Tomlinson.

Tomlinson’s personality was the antithesis of Spurling’s in almost every way. He was self-confident to the point of arrogant, motivated, controlling, and meticulous; a perfect combination of traits for a self-aggrandizing leader. As soon as Tomlinson became involved in the Christian Union, his influence was felt. With Tomlinson in charge, the name of the group was changed to the Holiness Church (Tomlinson’s church was called the Holiness Church at Camp Creek) and the beginnings of a denominational structure began to show. While Spurling was a Restorationist and an idealist, Tomlinson was a pragmatist. Where Spurling and Bryant would actively encourage Christian participation in war, Tomlinson was a pacifist. Where Spurling showed no indication that he desired to lead an organization, Tomlinson demonstrated an aggressive ambition to lead. Tomlinson joined the church at Camp Creek, was ordained, and installed as pastor all in one day. Despite their differences, they had one major thing in common: unquestionable holiness credentials. Tomlinson had been familiar with the Christian Union for some time, at least since the revivals of 1896. It was around that time that Tomlinson, while selling bibles, had been first introduced to Bryant. So, the members of the Christian Union were familiar with Tomlinson and his holiness background.

One major part of Tomlinson’s “holiness credentials” was his

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22 Ibid., 249.
23 Robins, 203.
monthly newsletter, *Samson’s Foxes*. *Samson’s Foxes* included everything one might expect from a holiness newsletter such as vehement denunciations of tobacco use, warnings against selfishness and, even on occasion, recommendations against seeing physicians in favor of divine healing.\textsuperscript{24} The Holiness Church would establish their own newsletter, called *The Way*, which was heavily influenced by *Samson’s Foxes*.

Tomlinson’s signing on as the new pastor of the Holiness Church at Camp Creek marks a distinct shift in the trajectory of the group of churches that would become the Church of God. Without the influence of Tomlinson, there is no indication that what became the Church of God would have been anything more than a local body of radical holiness Christians with no denominational structure and a loose congregational polity.

By 1906, the denominational structure that had been emerging from Tomlinson’s first appearance would be formalized. A small group representing local bodies from northeastern parts of Tennessee, northwestern Georgia, and southwestern North Carolina came together in formal union under the leadership of A. J. Tomlinson and formally became the Church of God.\textsuperscript{25} Another new feature that was a point of departure from the Spurling leadership is Tomlinson’s membership requirements. For membership in the Christian Union, one only need affirm his or her adherence to the New Testament as their only rule of law. By 1906, membership was becoming increasingly formalized and those who did not meet certain standards, such as anyone who was divorced, was denied membership in the Church.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{24} *Samson’s Foxes* 4, vol. 1. (Culberson, North Carolina: A. J. Tomlinson. April, 1901).

\textsuperscript{25} Robins, 117, 183. Tomlinson had, in his earlier years, been influenced by churches already identifying themselves as Churches of God located near Anderson, Indiana.

\textsuperscript{26} Charles Conn, *Like a Mighty Army* (Cleveland, Tennessee: Pathway Press, 1977), 83.
Perhaps it is ironic that a movement that started with the expressed purpose of Christian unity has had so many divisions and off-shoots. Much of this can be attributed to the autocratic, controlling personality of A. J. Tomlinson. However, it was with these same character traits that Tomlinson was able to co-opt and redirect the burgeoning Pentecostal-holiness movement in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. A movement that was previously dedicated to Christian unity, Tomlinson turned into a massive, top-down organization with him firmly in control.

The conflict between the first order of the Christian Union and the second order of the Church of God came to a head during the general assembly meeting in 1907. Here the lines between Spurling and Tomlinson were clearly drawn and we find the only indication of Spurling ever putting up a public fight to maintain the integrity of the organization he helped found 21 years prior. The debate was over pastoral appointments and the sides were drawn just as one might expect. Spurling advocated a congregational approach, and Tomlinson argued for Episcopal appointments that he himself would pass down. Ultimately, Tomlinson won the day, and the Union completed its transition into a denomination. In spite of this loss, Spurling never wavered in his support of either Tomlinson or the Church of God.

In February of 1906, at the other end of the country, Frank Bartleman began praying for a “real pentecost” with “signs following.” Then, in March, Bartleman met William Seymour who had just returned from a trip to Texas where he met and fell under the influence of Charles Parham. On April 9th, during a Bonnie Brae meeting in Los Angeles, the

27 Ibid., 205.
28 This was the location of the meeting prior to their move to Azusa Street.
spirit “fell” and there was speaking in tongues. From these meetings, a southern minister, Gaston B. Cashwell, would carry the message of Pentecost back to his home region. In June of 1907, Tomlinson and his fellow pastor and co-editor of The Way, M. S. Lemons, traveled to Birmingham, AL to hear the Pentecostal message of Cashwell’s follower, M. M. Pinson. Lemons recalled that, although neither he nor Tomlinson received the gift of tongues, they both left feeling satisfied that it was indeed Biblical and proper. After returning to Cleveland, Tennessee, they took the matter to Spurling, the man who was still considered the Biblical expert of the group. Spurling approved, declaring the practice “solid as a rock.”

Cashwell was subsequently invited to preach to the Tomlinson’s Church. During the preaching of Cashwell, Tomlinson would receive the Holy Ghost Baptism with the evidence of speaking in tongues. This event occurred in 1908. Church of God historian, Charles Conn, argues that Tomlinson was the last of the Church of God ministers to receive the Baptism. This assertion seems unlikely. It seems odd that Tomlinson would invite an outsider to preach Pentecost to his denomination when his associates already obtained the experience in question. It would also be peculiar that a group of ministers and lay people would chose a leader that did not share a deep a religious experience that they all claimed to have already attained. Finally, the only noted instance of someone leaving the organization came immediately following Tomlinson’s “baptism” experience. Immediately following the 1908 convention, Pastor J. H.

29 Frank Bartleman, Azusa Street, 41-43.
30 Tomlinson, Diary of A. J. Tomlinson, vol. 2. Citation found: Robins, 184.
31 Robins, 184.
33 Conn, 85.
Simpson stated his objections to the tongues doctrine and left the church.\textsuperscript{34} The most likely case is that there was an event that occurred in 1896, in Camp Creek, North Carolina that involved many people speaking in tongues; however, this appears to have been both an isolated event, and one without doctrinal substantiation. As such, it belongs in the narrative of glossolalia activities reported throughout pre-Pentecostal America. Reading the events of Camp Creek as a manifestation of the modern Pentecostal movement is possibly wishful anachronistic thinking by modern adherents desiring to trace their lineage further back than the facts allow. After the events of the Azusa Street mission became widely known, the individuals that were present at the Camp Creek meetings retroactively identified what they experienced with that new manifestation of Holy Ghost baptism, with speaking in tongues as the initial evidence. This retroactive identification, however, was beneficial in facilitating the ready acceptance of the new movement by the members of the Church of God. They were able to look at the experiences that had become a part of their heritage and collective folklore and see in the new movement something that looked very similar to what they had experienced 10 years prior. The move from holiness to Pentecostal denomination was easier for these Appalachian Christians than it would have been had they not shared the experiences of 1896. This was essentially confirmed by Tomlinson as he wrote in 1922, “those who received the Baptism did not realize what it was until after 1906.”\textsuperscript{35}

Another reason the members of the Church of God were so eager to accept this new interpretation of the second blessing is because it represented a more tangible experience of the second work of God’s

\textsuperscript{34} Tomlinson, \textit{Diary of A. J. Tomlinson}, 1:69-70.
\textsuperscript{35} “History of Pentecost,” \textit{The Faithful Standard} 1:6 (Sept 1922). Citation found: Robins, 272.
grace that they had been preaching since the beginning. It is very difficult to qualify exactly what “sanctification” means; it is even harder to prove that one has been sanctified. Accepting the Parham premise that speaking in tongues is the initial evidence of the Holy Ghost Baptism makes the second work a great deal more evident and far less ambiguous. This line of reasoning is not universal to all holiness churches of the period, but only the more radical “fire baptized” variants into which the Church of God would comfortably fit. They tended to emphasize the second work of grace and the emotionalism that comes with Pentecostalism. In the radical holiness groups, this emotionalism was already present to a much greater extent than it was with their more tepid brothers. It was almost natural that radical Holiness churches adopt this theology. As John Thomas Nichol points out in his work on the Pentecostal movement, the Church of God was not the only southern holiness body to adopt the Pentecostal message. The aptly named Pentecostal Holiness Church made a similar transition. The final reason that the Christian Union, in particular, would be receptive to the Pentecostal theology has to do with their origins as a Restorationist organization. They sought to “reform and restore,” rather than to create. As such, the Pentecostal message, that placed such a high degree of emphasis on the story of the creation of the church as told in Acts, is a message that would resonate well with the original Christian Union believers. This, combined with the nearly universal acceptance of tongues by their leaders,36 made the transition to a Pentecostal denomination almost natural.

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36 As noted earlier, J. H. Simpson left the group following the Pentecostal outburst at the 1908 convention.