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THE CHARACTERISTICS OF WILLIAM SEYMOUR'S SERMONS:
A REFLECTION ON PENTECOSTAL ETHOS

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Introduction

*The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC)'s Reflection on
Pentecostal Identity and Ethos*

Scholars have argued the multiple sources of Pentecostalism; therefore, it is difficult to achieve a consensus on what Pentecostal identity really is. In March 2010, the PAOC launched a theology seminar to discuss the subject.¹ Although the discussion does not represent the official point of view, it demonstrates the general perception of Pentecostal identity within the church. According to the result of a survey, most of their ministers do not insist on preserving the characteristics of Pentecostal ministry and faith any longer. One of the presenters, J. Martini, quoting from "Matrix Neo", frankly declared that "there is no spoon", to suggest that there is not any difference between Pentecostal and charismatic identity!² However, an alternative voice rose at the seminar. Peter Cusick and Brandon Malo claimed, "...remove the identity of the early Pentecostals and you lose the movement."³ In his article, "The Ideal Pentecostal Church: The Ethos

¹ <http://mpseminary.com/papers> (accessed on 3 November 2010)

² J. Martini, "'There is No Spoon': Assessing the Boundary between Classical Pentecostals and Charismatics". <http://www.mpseminary.com/documents/papers/Martini.pdf>, 1. (accessed on 3 November 2010)

³ Peter Cusick and Brandon Malo, "Pentecostal Identity: A Pastoral Perspective".

of Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada Churches: Spirit and Power,”⁴ Jim Lucas adopts the term “ethos” to illustrate the character of Pentecostal churches. According to Wiktionary, ethos refers to the “character and fundamental values of person, people, culture and movement,” which is parallel to the word “spirit” conveying the meaning of promotion of belief and convention.⁵

I grew up in an Assembly of God church that did not embrace Pentecostal identity. When the “third wave” was introduced to Hong Kong in 1990, I began to realize the charismatic dimension of the Christian faith particularly through my own Spirit baptism and to seek intellectual understanding of this experience. In 1996, Rodney Howard Browne’s revival ministry in Hong Kong even changed the direction of my ministry from being a teacher of a Bible college to a revivalist. However, I discovered that those who experienced revival at that time still do not have the theological “spoon” concerning Pentecostalism. In other words, they do not insist on practicing Pentecostal faith and teaching about it. I henceforth realize that it is crucial to nurture Pentecostal ethos within Pentecostal churches. To accomplish this, it is important to identify what Pentecostal ethos is. One of the ways is to trace back to Pentecostal history and find out what Pentecostal pioneers preached in the early period. In this article, I attempt to analyze William Seymour’s (1870-1922) sermons to suggest the substances of Pentecostal ethos. These sermons were recorded by Seymour’s co-worker, Clara Lum, and were printed on the *Apostolic Faith*. Larry Martin edited these sermons and published them in *Azusa Street Sermons by William J. Seymour*.⁶

Justification of Using Seymour’s Sermons

It is undeniable that Seymour was one of the prominent pioneers of the early Pentecostal Movement. Although his teacher, Charles Parham,

http://www.mpseminary.com/documents/papers/PentIdentity_01.pdf, 4.
(accessed on 3 November 2010)

⁴ http://www.mpseminary.com/documents/papers/PentIdentity_01.pdf.
(accessed on 3 November 2010)

⁵ <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/ethos>. (accessed on 3 November 2010)

⁶ Larry Martin’s *Azusa Street Sermons by William J. Seymour* (Joplin, MO: Christian Life Book, 1999).

established the doctrine of “evidential tongues,” his influence towards the revival was not as significant as was Seymour’s. In the beginning of the revival in 1906, Seymour published *The Apostolic Faith* under his Apostolic Mission. The newspaper was very popular at that time, and 50,000 copies of one of the issues was printed.⁷ It did not only report revival events in the US and worldwide from September 1906 to June 1908,⁸ but it contained Seymour’s sermons. Hence, it displays historical reality as well as spiritual direction and ethos of the early Pentecostal Movement.⁹ Douglas Jacobson asks, “Is There Theology in Pentecostalism?”¹⁰ Pentecostalism has been criticized for being dominated by emotionalism and anti-intellectualism, but I want to argue that, right from the beginning, Pentecostals have been serious about theology. The pioneers molded the movement through testimonies and defined it with preaching. They did not only identify their faith but also explained their religious experience to those who agreed or disagreed with them. As Jacobson argues, “Pentecostalism was a protest against the use of religious words without religious experiences to back them up: it was a protest against theological hollowness”.¹¹ Seymour certainly was an outstanding leader in this “protest” by initiating spiritual experience and preaching. According to Jacobson, the focus of his sermons was not the same as Parham’s. Seymour tended to be pastoral in his preaching while Parham was more revelatory, so that he could effectively convey Christian principles and expectations on God. He directly responded to questions concerning the meaning of atonement in his sermon such as “The Precious Atonement,” and how to receive Spirit baptism in “You Should Receive the Holy Spirit,” “The Spirit Baptism” and “To the Seekers of

⁷ <http://www.azusastreet.org/TheApostolicFaith.htm>. (accessed on 3 November 2010)

⁸ Because of the division within the Azusa Street Mission, some workers of the *Apostolic Faith* moved from Los Angeles to Portland and took away the reader list and readers’ postal addresses, the newspaper became less influential.

⁹ Seymour explained the doctrine of evidential tongues and Spirit baptism in other publications, but the author is inclined to study the *Apostolic Faith* since it directly demonstrates the Azusa Street Movement and the theological development.

¹⁰ Douglas Jacobson, *A Reader in Pentecostal Theology: Voices from the First Generation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 4-6

¹¹ Douglas Jacobson, *A Reader in Pentecostal Theology*, 5.

the Holy Spirit,” etc.¹² When we study Seymour’s sermons, however, we have to be aware of the limitations:

1. Since there was neither voice nor video recorder in the early 1910s, it is possible that Seymour’s sermons that are available for us nowadays were recorded based on the listeners’ personal preferences. In fact, the characteristics and power of Pentecostal sermons do not lie on the sermons *per se*, but also the divine inspiration that the preacher receives, the way he expresses and the flow of anointing, which obviously cannot be recorded merely with pen and paper.
2. Seymour was the leader of the Apostolic Mission, but he did not produce a large amount of sermons and publications since he focused on prayers rather than preaching. As Martin records,

Seymour would lead the service from a chair behind the makeshift shoebox pulpit. Often he would bow low with his head inside the crates or leaning against their side, praying as the services progressed. Witnesses remembered him as “very prayerful, a very quietman.” The Azusa leader believed, “Our highest place is love at His feet.”

Like Evan Roberts in Wales, Seymour did not preach long or often, allowing things to go their own way, or more appropriately “the Lord’s way.” E. S. Williams, a regular participant said, “His preaching was very limited.” Yet, when he spoke, he ministered under such an anointing that his words changed the world.¹³

3. The purpose of studying Seymour’s sermons is not about establishing Pentecostal doctrines for today; but rather, we aim to gain understanding of the ethos in the early Pentecostal Movement so that it may become a source of strength and renewal for Pentecostal churches nowadays.

¹² Larry Martin, *Azusa Street Sermons by William J. Seymour*, 46.

¹³ Larry Martin, *The Life and Ministry of William Seymour* (Joplin: Christian Life Books, 1999), 184-185.

Characteristics of Azusa Street Services and Seymour's Sermons

1. God's Anointing and Prayer

When we study Seymour's sermons, it is important to put them in the context of the entire revival services, which were characterized by a zealous desire for God.¹⁴ According to A. W. Orwig's firsthand account, worshippers did not worry about the length of the service, even if it might last for six hours, because they immersed themselves in God's anointing. As he recalled, "I will not now attempt to describe sermons, testimonies, prayers and songs, only to say that they were usually attended with divine unction to such a degree as to move and melt hearts in every direction".¹⁵ Services were "dynamic. Everything was spontaneous. There was lots of prayer, singing hymns, singing in tongues, testimonies, scripture reading and then preaching."¹⁶ Seymour and the congregation took prayers seriously. His praying on the shoe box pulpit in the cargo container was well-known. He was regarded as a "very prayerful, a very quiet man."¹⁷

During services, worshippers usually knelt down to pray for six to eight times.¹⁸

2. Singing, Worship and Thirst for God

Singing and worship nourished the expectation of the work of the Holy Spirit and the sense of His power. This song, "The Comforter Has Come,"¹⁹ was frequently sung in the Azusa Street services.

¹⁴ This is spoken based on my own leadership of revival ministry and personal experience in revival services led by Kathryn Kulman, Benny Hinn and Rodney Howard Browne. Singing, sermons and praying ministry are in one flow, particularly when the preacher leads the whole service himself. To follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit is the crucial factor of spontaneity.

¹⁵ A. W. Orwig, 'My First Visit to the Azusa Street Pentecostal Mission', in Larry Martin (ed) *The True Believers: Eye Witness Accounts of the Revival that Shook the World* (Joplin, MO: Christian Life Books, 1998), 60.

¹⁶ Larry Martin, *The Life and Ministry of William Seymour*, 179.

¹⁷ Larry Martin, *The Life and Ministry of William Seymour*, 184.

¹⁸ Larry Martin, *The Life and Ministry of William Seymour*, 180.

O spread the tidings 'round, wherever man is found,
Wherever human hearts and human woes abound;
Let ev'ry Christian tongue proclaim the joyful sound:
The Comforter has come!

Refrain

The Comforter has come, the Comforter has come!
The Holy Ghost from Heav'n, the Father's promise giv'n;
O spread the tidings 'round, wherever man is found—
The Comforter has come!

The long, long night is past, the morning breaks at last,
And hushed the dreadful wail and fury of the blast,
As o'er the golden hills the day advances fast!
The Comforter has come.

Lo, the great King of kings, with healing in His wings,
To ev'ry captive soul a full deliverance brings;
And through the vacant cells the song of triumph rings;
The Comforter has come!

O boundless love divine! How shall this tongue of mine
To wond'ring mortals tell the matchless grace divine—
That I, a child of hell, should in His image shine!
The Comforter has come!

This hymn characterizes the features of black gospel music, which was derived from “spirituals” and “shouts”. Black gospel music made a tremendous impact in the Holiness Movement. It is rhythmic and emotionally expressive. The lyrics were composed with biblical scriptures and sung in a “call-and-response” style by the preacher and congregation. Sometimes the preacher sang instantaneously.²⁰ Since

¹⁹ www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/c/o/comfortaer.htm (accessed on 3 November 2010).

²⁰ Andre Wilson-Dickson, *The Story of Christian Music: From Gregorian Chant to Black Gospel: An Authoritative Illustrated Guide to All the Major Traditions of Music for Worship* (Oxford: Lion, 1992), chapter 38.

there was not a projector to project the lyrics for everybody to see, the congregation only sang the refrains and worship leaders or preachers sang the main verses. We can assume that this was the way that Seymour led worship.²¹ When the refrain was sung, the whole service was filled with a desire for God. Another prominent feature of the services of the Apostolic Mission was the “Heavenly Choir”—the whole congregation singing in tongues.²² The Holy Spirit worked through the desire of people nourished from earnest prayers and dynamic music; then vision, prophecy, healing and exorcism would follow. This is one of the characteristics of Pentecostal ethos.

3. “The Lord’s Way”

Donald Gee suggests that Seymour followed “the Lord’s way” to preach.²³ He surfed with the flow of the worship—the guidance of the Holy Spirit. His preaching was short, as Martin describes,

What kind of a preacher was Seymour? A. G. Osterberg described him “as a slow speaking, humble, unpretentious, Bible loving, God fearing minister.” In another interview, Osterberg described Seymour and his preaching: “He was meek and plain spoken and no orator. He spoke the common language of the uneducated class. He might preach for three-quarters of an hour with no more emotionalism than that post. He was no arm-waving thunderer, by any stretch of the imagination. The only way to explain the results is this: that his teachings were so simple that people who were opposed to organized religion fell for it. It was the simplicity that attracted them.”

When William Manley attended, he described Seymour’s message as “short” and “fiery.” He said, “They speak with the most intense earnestness I have ever seen and what they say is in

²¹ Roberts Liardon, *God’s General: Why They Succeeded and Why Some Failed* (Chinese version), pp. 233, 237-238.

²² Larry Martin, *The Life and Ministry of William Seymour*, 187.

²³ Larry Martin, *The Life and Ministry of William Seymour*, 185. Quoted from Donald Gee, *The Pentecostal Movement* (London: Elim Publishing Co. Ltd, 1949), 12.

the tenderest love. Not a harsh word is spoken. No denunciation of anyone, except in tender love.”²⁴

From the quotation above, we can see that Seymour’s preaching style was very different from charismatic preachers nowadays. His preaching was powerful and “fiery” and, therefore, Florence Crawford believed that it was not preaching that touched her heart, but a simple acclamation, “Hallelujah”, that brought her into God’s presence.²⁵ Seymour’s preaching style and the way he led services were both revivalistic. This style is determined not only by the worship leader and the participation of the congregation, but also the anointing of the Holy Spirit and people’s response to it. This revivalistic preaching following the flow of services is another characteristic of Pentecostal ethos, which will be elaborated upon in the next section.

The Theological Perspectives of Seymour’s Sermons

1. The Five-fold Gospel

There are nineteen sermons printed in the *Apostolic Faith*. If we categorize these sermons with the paradigm of the five-fold gospel, we can see the following.²⁶

²⁴ Larry Martin, *The Life and Ministry of William Seymour*, 185.

²⁵ Larry Martin, *The Life and Ministry of William Seymour*, 186.

²⁶ The Holiness Movement (Wesleyan tradition) and the Keswick Movement (Reformed tradition) directly influenced the development of the Pentecostal Movement, which subsequently was divided into two groups: the three-stage theory (e.g., the Pentecostal Holiness Church) and the two-stage theory (e.g., the Assemblies of God). In the early stage of the Movement, pioneers like Charles Parham and William Seymour clearly adopted the Holiness heritage, and preached about justification, sanctification and Spirit baptism as the Pentecostal truths. They emphasized the five-fold gospel: justification (Jesus is the savior), sanctification (Jesus is the baptizer as the Holiness Movement regarded Spirit baptism as sanctification), healing (Jesus is the healer), second coming (Jesus is the coming king) and Spirit baptism (Jesus is the baptizer of the Holy Spirit). Then William Durham attempted to take over Seymour’s leadership and taught about the doctrine of “justification (complete sanctification)-Spirit baptism”, which caused division in the Movement. Durham’s teaching became the theological foundation of the two-stage doctrine of the Assemblies of God.

	Justification	Sanctification	Healing	Spirit Baptism	Second Coming
1. The Precious Atonement	X	X	X	X	
2. The Way into the Holiest	X	X		X	
3. River of Living Water	X	X	X	X	X
4. In Money Matters				X	
5. Counter-feits	X	X		X	
6. Behold the Bridegroom Cometh		X		X	X
7. Receive Ye the Holy Spirit	X	X		X	
8. Gifts of the Spirit	X				
9. Rebecca: Type of Bride of Christ	X	X		X	
10. The Baptism with the Holy Ghost	X	X		X	
11. The Holy Spirit bishop of the Church	X	X		X	
12. The Marriage Tie	X				
13. Testimony and Praise to God				X	X
14. To One Seeking the Holy Ghost	X	X	X	X	
15. Christ's Messages to the Church	X	X	X	X	X
16. To the Marries	X	X		X	X
17. Sanctified on the Cross	X	X			X

18. Baptism of the Holy Ghost	X	X	X	X	
19. The Holy Ghost and the Bride	X	X		X	

Seymour's teaching was directly related to the core doctrine of the Pentecostal faith. Only three of the nineteen sermons do not mention justification or Spirit baptism and twelve of them have both of them mentioned. These simple statistics show that Seymour took these two aspects very seriously. Moreover, there are fifteen sermons about sanctification, which is also significant. Seymour taught about sanctification because it was believed to be the criteria of receiving Spirit baptism, as he clearly explained in his sermons, "You Should Receive the Holy Spirit" and "Baptism of the Holy Ghost." He believed that justification, sanctification and Spirit baptism were inseparable. This view was opposed to the Holiness teaching about the equivalence of sanctification and Spirit baptism and their objection of tongues as the initial evidence of Spirit baptism suggested in Acts 2:4. As he explains,

When we have a clear knowledge of justification and sanctification, through the precious blood of Jesus Christ in our hearts, then we can be a recipient of the baptism with the Holy Ghost. Many people today are sanctified, cleansed from all sin and perfectly consecrated to God, but they have never obeyed the Lord according to Acts 1, 4, 5, 8 and Luke 24:39, for their real personal Pentecost, the endowment of power for service and work and for sealing unto the day of redemption. The baptism with the Holy Ghost is a free gift without repentance upon the sanctified, cleansed vessel.²⁷

If today's Pentecostals face the challenge of the evangelical,²⁸ then the challenge that Seymour had came from the Holiness people at that time.²⁹ However, Seymour did not use provoking words to defend his

²⁷ "Receive Ye the Holy Spirit", in Larry Martin (ed.) *Azusa Street Sermons*, 50.

²⁸ Robert Menzies has made significant contribution to the dialogue between Pentecostals and evangelicals. See William and Robert Menzies, *Spirit and Power: Foundations of Pentecostal Experience* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000).

²⁹ Roberts Liardon, *God's General*, 230-232.

faith. Jacobson argues that when division occurred, Seymour diverted the focus of his teaching from evidential tongues to love and unity; he verbally expressed grief instead of anger.³⁰ Seymour came from the Holiness tradition. Although when he preached about Spirit baptism, he had not yet had that experience accompanied with the evidential tongues, he believed what he taught was biblical. He was baptized in the Spirit after three days of prayer.³¹ Similar experience happened to the Holiness adherents who studied the Bible carefully to investigate the validity of the teaching of Spirit baptism and evidential tongues.³² Seymour's teaching had a strong apologetic character but was expressed in a pastoral tone in his sermons, which influenced the Holiness believers to accept the truth of Spirit baptism with biblical evidence.

2. Spirit Baptism as the Theme

Seymour focused on Spirit baptism in his preaching. As mentioned above, he emphasized the intimate relation between sanctification and Spirit baptism and attempted to clarify the confusing idea of the two-stage theory preached by Holiness adherents. As far as Seymour was concerned, it was important to eradicate any doctrinal hindrances so that attendants of his services would receive Spirit baptism with the evidential tongues, which was the perfect love casting out all fear.³³ He firmly believed that the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire was the flowing love of God and power for ministry. God's love that had been received through justification and was internalized through sanctification would be transformed into the love for others through Spirit baptism. The three stages of Christian experience were actually three stages of faith that led Christians to immerse into God's love.³⁴

³⁰ Douglas Jacobson, *A Reader in Pentecostal Theology*, 46.

³¹ Glenn A. Cook, "The Azusa Street Meeting: Some Highlights of this Outpouring," in Larry Martin (ed.) *The True Believers*, 52-53.

³² Ernest S. Williams, "Memories of Azusa Street Mission", in Larry Martin (ed.) *The True Believers*, 47-48.

³³ "Behold! The Bridegroom Cometh", in Larry Martin (ed) *Azusa Street Sermons*, 45; "Sanctified on the Cross", in Larry Martin (ed) *Azusa Street Sermons*, 105.

³⁴ Douglas Jacobson, *Thinking in the Spirit: Theologies of the Early Pentecostal Movement* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003, kindle edition) location 1149-1159.

Regarding doctrines about healing and the second coming, although both of them appeared less frequently in Seymour's sermons, they were not less significant.³⁵ As A. W. Owig recorded that "the subject, or doctrine, of divine healing received special attention and many cases of deliverance from various diseases and infirmities were more or less continually reported. Likewise was the doctrine of the premillennial coming Christ ardently promulgated."³⁶ When Seymour preached about the second coming of Jesus, he developed this point from Spirit baptism. In "River of Living Water," he affirmed that the promise of Spirit baptism was not just for the present, but would continue until Jesus came back.³⁷

The testimonies given by the participants of Seymour's services reflect a fact that theological teaching in sermons initiated experience, especially Spirit baptism. Jacobson gives a fair judgment on the role of theology in that period which explains why Seymour's revival movement could make such a great impact on the world for more than one hundred years. He says, "Experience alone did not make one a Pentecostal. It was experience interpreted in a Pentecostal way that made one a Pentecostal."³⁸ The interaction between theology and experience is another characteristic of Pentecostal ethos.

3. Revivalistic Preaching

In his article concerning Pentecostal preaching, George O. Wood, the General Superintendent of the Assemblies of God in the USA, suggests three aspects of revivalistic preaching: preparation, proclamation and provocation.³⁹ Preparation is not just about the content of the sermon, but also the preacher's life—whether he is filled

³⁵ According to participants of Seymour's services, Seymour always focused on three themes: Jesus' second coming, Spirit baptism and sanctified life. See Russell Chandles, "Pasadena Cleric Recalls Mission", in Larry Martin (ed.) *The True Believers*, 135.

³⁶ A. W. Owig, "My First Visit to Azusa Street Pentecostal Mission", in Larry Martin (ed.) *The True Believers*, 61.

³⁷ "River of Living Water", in Larry Martin (ed) *Azusa Street Sermons*, 32.

³⁸ Douglas Jacobson, *Thinking in the Spirit*, location 135-144.

³⁹ George Wood, "The Pentecostal Pulpit of the 21st Century". http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/199803/076_pentecostal_pulpit.cfm (accessed on 3 November 2010).

by the Holy Spirit. Hence, the preacher's prayer can be more important than Bible study because the inspiration from the Holy Spirit determines how he interprets and applies scriptures in his sermons. This argument does not imply a devaluation of academic hermeneutics, but I want to suggest that readers of the Bible are influenced by their background, culture and theological paradigm. For example, some contemporary theories on biblical hermeneutics respond to the postmodern situation. The critical methods of academic hermeneutics are skills and require interpreters to be objective; however, prayers preserve the subjective elements when interpreting revelations from reading the Bible. It also nurtures humility. Hence, evangelicals' criticism against charismatic preachers of overemphasis on prayers reflects their overemphasis on rationality. Pentecostal preachers wait upon the Holy Spirit in prayers and preach with the anointing. As a Pentecostal pastor says, "'The anointing of the Holy Spirit enables the preacher to operate in the gifts of the Holy Spirit with power and seeing results from his ministries.'"⁴⁰ For example, although Seymour did not emphasize healing and exorcism, they happened in the midst of his preaching. The upper room of the Apostolic Faith's building stored crutches, sticks and other medical assisting tools used by the healed.⁴¹ This reflects the anointing of the Spirit upon Seymour.

4. Christ as the Core of Pentecostal Faith, not the Holy Spirit

Unlike the pneumatological emphasis of some contemporary charismatic churches, early Pentecostalism upheld Christocentrism. Wood states that "God's written Word" and Christocentrism should be the foundation of Pentecostal preaching; that can avoid individualistic concern on spiritual experience in preaching. As mentioned above, participants in the Azusa Street Revival earnestly sought Spirit baptism based on their understanding of scriptures as a result of serious Bible study. The apologetic concern in Seymour's sermons demonstrates the importance of proclaiming God's written Word. Nowadays, preachers tend to focus on the pastoral purpose of preaching and to deal with problems of Christians' everyday life in their sermons. They apply scriptures to illustrate their arguments and hence biblical-interpretive

⁴⁰ Quoted in Aldwin Ragoonath, *Preach the Word: A Pentecostal Approach* (Winnipeg: Agape Teaching Ministry of Canada Inc., 2004), 26.

⁴¹ Concerning the stories on healing in the Azusa Street Revival, see Larry Martin, *The Life and Ministry of William Seymour*, 190-193.

preaching becomes crucial. However, this biblical-centric preaching is not always Christocentric. In contrast, the authors of scriptures in the New Testament, who were preachers and leaders of the early church, did not directly quote from the Old Testament to explain to believers how they should solve certain problems in their daily life; instead, they drew ideas from Jesus' teaching. Heb 12:1-3 and 1 Pet 2:4-10 are good examples on this regard. Hence, in some Pentecostal churches, when ministers encourage believers to receive Spirit baptism, they remind them of Jesus being filled by the Holy Spirit as He was being baptized with water (Lk 3:22).

5. "Re-experience"

Ragoonath discovers that Seymour's preaching reflected the oral style of African Americans, as it is shown in his sermon, "The Holy Spirit Bishop of the Church." Seymour ended the preaching with a "Rap" song:

When men and women are filled with the Holy Ghost,
Everywhere they go
Living waters will flow.
The Lord promised that out of our being
Living rivers of water should flow
This is the Holy Ghost, Amen!
The mighty Pison, the Gihon, the Hiddekel, the Euphrates of
our soul will flow.
Representing the rivers of salvation, Amen!⁴²

Seymour did not only use narrative scriptures, but also epistles for his sermons, and applied symbolic hermeneutics to interpret them. The significance of God's written words, the Bible, is that the preacher and listeners can re-experience the scripture themselves and the scriptures become living words in the present.⁴³ This happens when prayers are incorporated into Bible reading. Pentecostal preaching is not simply about conveying the written words in the Bible, but spreading "rhema"—revelation and speech from the Holy Spirit. This practice seems to be completely irrelevant to academic hermeneutics, but as far

⁴² "The Holy Spirit Bishop of the Church", in Larry Martin (ed), *Azusa Street Sermons*, 71-72.

⁴³ Aldwin Ragoonath, *Preach the Word*, 103.

as the receivers of “rhema” are concerned, constructing theological understandings through waiting upon the Holy Spirit in prayers is an alternative hermeneutic methodology. It is difficult to judge which one is more applicable than the other one as they are compatible with each other, but a distinctive result of this methodology is that it leads people to enter into a spiritual realm and to be challenged by God’s words and “rhema”.

6. Provocation Materializes Revivals

Wood’s idea of provocation explains the preaching style in the Azusa Street Revival and the external characteristic of revivalistic preaching.⁴⁴ Seymour’s sermons are not rationally persuasive, but experientially provocative so that listeners will be prompted to take responsive actions. As far as the listeners of Seymour were concerned, they were invoked to seek sanctification so that Spirit baptism with tongues as evidence would follow. This is what we call “altar call” today. It is not only a practice, but also an expression of Pentecostal ethos. Ragoonath claims,

The altar service is a vital part of a Pentecostal service. It is equally important to preaching. Without the altar call a Pentecostal worship experience will be lacking, it will be routine, traditional, partial, lopsided and incomplete and God will be hindered from working. There will be no miracles, signs, wonders and deliverance taking place. The Pentecostal movement will shrivel up and die. Without the altar call there will be no method of leading non-Christians to faith in Christ and the heart and soul of the Pentecostal movement will die. The sick will return home sick; the demon possessed will remain demon possessed; people will return home discouraged with no one to encourage them in prayer even when they seriously want it.⁴⁵

Seymour took prayers very seriously and that affected the revival in Azusa Street. Preaching, praying and waiting upon God to answer prayers were reasons for the manifestations of the Holy Spirit and

⁴⁴ George Wood, “The Pentecostal Pulpit of the 21st Century”.

⁴⁵ Aldwin Ragoonath, *Preach the Word*, 37.

revival to happen. E. S. Williams describes the altar call ministry in the Azusa Street revival as the following:

I wish I could describe what I saw. Prayer and worship were everywhere. The altar was filled with seekers; some were kneeling; others were prone on the floor; some were speaking in tongues. Everyone was doing something; all seemingly lost in God. I simply stood and looked, for I had never seen anything like it.⁴⁶

Conclusion: Infiltrating Pentecostal Ethos into Pentecostal Churches

“Remove the identity of the early Pentecostals and you lose the movement” is the reality of some Pentecostal churches. Through analyzing Seymour’s sermons, we understand the ethos of the Classical Pentecostal Movement. The nurturing of a sense of thirst for God through singing and worship, revivalistic preaching, altar call ministry and the complement of experience and theology are what Seymour left for the entire Pentecostal Movement. As Chinese Pentecostal churches become more evangelical-ised, charismatic and ambitious of building a mega-church, unfortunately, those characters of Pentecostal ethos have been fading away. The academic-oriented and specialized training in Bible colleges suggest that traditional Pentecostal ethos is irrelevant to the current situation. These are the reality and limitation of our churches nowadays, but what we need to do is “Stand for the restoration of the faith once delivered unto the saints,”⁴⁷ as it was proclaimed in the first issue of the *Apostolic Faith*. Undeniably, Seymour’s hermeneutics based on inspiration from prayers does not meet the requirements of academic hermeneutics, but it demonstrates the prophetic power. From the apologetic perspective, this power did not only challenge the lifeless religious practices in the Holiness Movement, but also emphasized the significance of sanctification, so that the church could receive Spirit baptism as promised in the Bible. His revivalistic character enforced the revival movement to become a missionary movement of faith. He molded the spiritual direction of the entire Movement through preaching and revival meetings. Spirit

⁴⁶ Ernest Williams, “Memories of Azusa Street Mission”, in Larry Martin (ed.) *The True Believers*, 48.

⁴⁷ *Apostolic Faith*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Sept 1906), 9.

baptism was the axis of his sermons; the fivefold gospel and redemption were central themes. The spiritual heritage that he left for us is indeed precious for contemporary Pentecostal churches that seek the infiltration of the Holy Spirit.