

Penecostals!! Church History Didn't Start in 1906

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A funny thing happened to Harvard scholar Harvey Cox. He wrote a book in 1965 called "The Secular City" claiming that old-school Christianity was done--"So long Apostles Creed, so long miracles, so long angels and demons, so long Billy Graham-style gospel message." Then in 1994 he sort of had to eat those words, and he wrote a book called "Fire from Heaven." In it he more-or-less admitted--"Whoops! While all of us scholars were making stuff up, old-school Christians on steroids--THE PENTECOSTALS--took over the planet." At least Cox got the second book right--Pentecostals (and Neo-Pentecostals) have certainly taken over the planet. If you do missions just about any place where Christianity is growing--Latin America, Africa, China--you find tongues-speaking, miracle-working Pentecostals. Sadly, few people seem to have a handle on just what Pentecostalism is and where it came it from this includes Pentecostals themselves.

The popular party line in Pentecostalism is that the earth was a barren wasteland until 1906 when the Holy Spirit finally showed up. Nothing could be further from the truth. The fact is that Azusa street (1906) came on the heels of perhaps the greatest (not-Pentecostal) revival America has ever seen in 1905 (find the lecture on this time by J.E. Orr). From coast to coast whole cities were shut down, Churches of every stripe were packed, Bible Colleges and Seminaries were birthed to train all the prospective missionaries and ministers. Pentecostals brought absolutely nothing new to the table ... except the belief that tongues was the tell-tale sign that a person was really ready to serve God (i.e., baptized/empowered by the Holy Spirit).

The Pentecostal movement emerged out of a white-hot, fiery sort of Evangelicalism that dominated much of the English-speaking world from the early 1700s through the early 1900s. Anyone willing to do their homework will find revivals exploding all over the globe during that 1700-early 1900 era, and these revivals would make any Pentecostal's jaw hit the floor. I like these pre-Pentecostal Evangelicals because they tended to be better educated (the movement was born in the halls of Oxford), and tended to have much greater, long term transformative effect on culture than Pentecostals do. These pre-Pentecostalism Evangelicals had earth shaking encounters with the Holy Spirit, expected God to heal (even John Wesley's horse was healed by prayer), and they would even cast out demons when necessary. The only things they didn't do, it seems, was speak in tongues ... and since this is the "sign above all signs" for many Pentecostals, these old school Evangelicals have been largely written off by today's Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals (Charismatics).

So ... everyone sort of ignores that awesome 1700-early 1900 era now; Pentecostals don't like it because they didn't speak in tongues, and non-Pentecostals don't like them because they are just too scary. Sadly, this white-hot pre-Pentecostal Evangelicalism disappeared for the most part. In its place we got 1. Pentecostalism, 2. Fundamentalism, and 3. Neo-Evangelicalism. I guess God found option 1 the most most workable. Now, I don't have anything against a good, biblical, spiritually healthy Pentecostal--they are typically my dearest friends. They are nothing other than old-school Evangelicals who happen to speak in tongues. I just wish that Pentecostals and not-Pentecostal Evangelicals alike would get in touch with their roots.