

“Meet Sam Page: Another Window on Early Pentecostal Holiness Spirituality”

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Before we begin this morning, I want to encourage you to see historians as essentially forward-looking people. We study the past, to be sure, but not to live there. While historians seek to tell true, interesting, and meaningful stories about the past, we tell them standing squarely in the present and with at least one eye fixed on the future.

I also want to preface my comments with this testimony: I thank God that I am saved, sanctified, and filled with Holy Spirit of God. Many times He has healed my body. (I should be dead, but I am alive.) And I look forward to His return when this man who deserves Hell will inherit Heaven solely on the basis of what Jesus Christ did for me on the Cross.

I stand before you richly blessed & greatly honored. I am blessed that my family (and my wife Gwen’s family) have received rich spiritual nourishment from this denomination across six generations—a relationship that began even before the 1911 merger. And I am honored to be part of this Centennial Celebration. Other than entrusting me to shepherd a local congregation, this is certainly as great a privilege as my church could ever extend to me. Thank you.

There are so many here today that I would like to thank were there time, but I feel compelled to acknowledge three Pentecostal Holiness saints vital to launching my career as an historian of our movement: first Dr. Vinson Synan, for nearly forty years my mentor and exemplar, and also the Reverends Eddie and Daisy Morris for opening their Falcon home to me—and their extraordinary collection of primary sources—starting back in 1975.

For historians, these primary sources—no matter how fragile or fragmentary—are our window on the past. Some windows are large and some small, some are clear and some almost impossible to see through. Those of us whose attention has been arrested by the early history of this church have enjoyed looking through large, clear windows, like the copious written records left by G. F. Taylor and J. H. King. In recent years, we have begun to sense the value of peering through small and cloudy windows too, like those which opened up momentarily when a pioneer evangelist or a praying mother would send one riveting testimonial letter to *The Bridegroom’s Messenger* or *The Advocate* before disappearing from their pages.¹ We are also beginning to look through the middle-sized but hard to find windows that open only when we painstakingly assemble the scattered written records left by figures whose names we have long known—like Daniel Awrey and T. J. McIntosh and Sarah Minerva Payne—but whose actual lives have remained in the shadows because they did not have the time or inclination to write books (or their books have not survived). G. B. Cashwell was in this category before Bishop Beacham pieced together his story and gave us a new vantage point on our early history.²

¹ E.g., see Daniel Woods, “The Royal Telephone: Early Pentecostalism in the South and the Enthusiastic Practice of Prayer,” in Beth Barton Schweiger and Donald G. Mathews, eds. *Religion in the American South* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2004), 125-152.

² Doug Beacham, *Azusa East: The Life and Times of G. B. Cashwell* (Franklin Springs GA; LifeSprings Resources, 2006).

My task today is to recreate for you the texture and substance of early Pentecostal Holiness spirituality. And I want to do this by opening one of these middle-sized windows to you—by looking at the life of a man whose name most of us know because he was elected here one hundred years ago to serve as our first General Superintendent, but whose voice and passions have never made it into our written histories.

My topic this morning is “Meet Sam Page: *Another Window* on Early Pentecostal Holiness Spirituality.”

We know the name Samuel Daniel Page today primarily because in the absence of J. H. King he was narrowly elected over Brother King by a vote of 19 to 17. Some here may know that he was also one of the trustees of the newly-merged Pentecostal Holiness Church, that in 1915 he was appointed to the first Pentecostal Holiness Missions Board, and that after serving one term two-year term as General Superintendent he served for eight years as Assistant General Superintendent—first to Brother Taylor and then to Brother King. Some may also know that prior to the merger Sam Page had long served the Fire-Baptized Holiness Church as an evangelist, trustee, Assistant General Superintendent, and (Acting) Ruling Elder of North Carolina. A few may even know that before any of this Sam Page was instrumental in organizing the first North Carolina Holiness Association in 1896, a group that attracted A. B. Crumpler, the most noted holiness preacher in the state, to serve as its president. (Though to be fair I need to tell you that the very next year he helped blow that young organization apart by join forces with the new Fire-Baptized movement that condemned Crumpler and anyone else who did not accept a “third blessing” of fiery power as “tame holiness devils.”)³

This is an impressive list of appointments and accomplishments, but to be honest, it reveals little about the man Sam Page except that his fellow ministers had confidence in him as a godly leader. As I looked closer at the historical record, though, I found that some of his co-laborers openly lamented his limitations and even one of his best friends described him a “gloriously unique.” Let me briefly share five facets of his ministry that sometimes drew criticism (or at least raised some eyebrows):

- Though Sam Page served at the highest leadership levels, he was not always conversant with the procedures of the *Discipline* and his motions at conference were sometimes (as his friend A. E. Robinson put it) “so ridiculous through improper wording” that his fellow ministers lobbied to have them omitted from the minutes to prevent embarrassment.⁴
- In another apparent anomaly, Brother Page was gifted at both making and raising money but often showed up to preach in a worn-out suit and with more watermelons seeds in his pockets than dollars. “I could wear better than this,” he once told Florence Goff, “but I want to help folks.” And help people he did, “Ma” Goff added, by giving his nice suits to preachers who had none, by putting many young ministers that he was mentoring through school, and even once by borrowing “a hundred dollars to help a poor preacher in distress.”⁵

³ The preceding summary of S. D. Page’s leadership positions is drawn primarily from Vinson Synan’s *Old-Time Power: A Centennial History of the Pentecostal Holiness Church* (Franklin Springs GA; LifeSprings Resources, 1998) and a close reading of the following periodicals: *The Way of Faith* (1895-1897), *Live Coals of Fire* (1899-1900), and *Live Coals* (1904-1907).

⁴ “Reverend Samuel Daniel Page Memorial Issue” of *The Pentecostal Holiness Advocate* (December 6, 1934), 2. [Hereafter cited as “Memorial Issue,” *PHA*.]

⁵ “Memorial Issue,” *PHA*, 10-11.

- Some even questioned his commitment to sanctified living. Sam Page held the standards of “Bible holiness” as high as anyone—once condemning Sunday School picnics as “boisterous festivity” that would open the door to raffling cakes and selling oysters in the church—but he was also known as such a friend to wayward and defrocked preachers that sometimes, A. E. Robison explained, he was “classed a friend of our enemies and unwanted in some of our pulpits.”⁶
- And though his primary identity of Sam Page throughout life was as holiness preacher (down to being buried in a white suit and having the words “I wish I’d been a better man” carved on his headstone) and though he also understood both “Fire-Baptized” and “Pentecostal” to be adjectives modifying the noun phrase “Holiness Church,” there were times when he ran so hard after Holy Ghost power that he caused concern among even his closest friends. A. E. Robison remembered that in 1899, when a Fire-Baptized leader announced that he had been given certain spiritual gifts, Brother Page followed him around for days studying his every move in hopes of being granted such powers to enhance his ministry. And in 1903, when he was Assistant General Superintendent of the Fire-Baptized Holiness Church, his close friend Sarah Payne, managing editor of *Live Coals*, refused to print his testimony of having received an explosive baptism of dynamite. Though believing that he was describing an actual encounter with the Spirit of God, she warned him that publishing such a letter based purely on experience and without clear scriptural support would endanger dangerous the movement by inviting false manifestations. She clearly loved and respected Brother Page, but she also knew that there was no baptism promised in God’s Word beyond being baptized with the Holy Ghost and fire.⁷
- Lastly, though Sam Page had probably won more souls to the Lord (judging by the testimonies in *The Advocate* and other early papers) than anyone present at the 1911 merger, some people openly pitied his inability to preach. Brother Page heard this last charge so often that he developed a stock answer: “I never said I was called to preach. I just said that Jesus saved me from hell and told me to go home and tell everyone what he had done for me!”⁸

A.E. Robison recounted this story: When Sam Page held a tent meeting, it was his habit to sleep in the tent at night and then to find a quiet place in the woods where he would lie on his face and pray for most of the day. Once, a couple of his fellow ministers were talking about Brother Page’s poor preaching as they strolled by his “secret place.” While most of us might have remained hidden until they had passed, Sam Page mildly rose to his feet from his place of prayer and said, “Well [brothers], I do the best I can.”⁹

Brother Robison used this story to illustrate Sam Page’s humility—that election to high office did not puff him up and the most hurtful criticism failed to elicit either anger or self-pity. Some preachers are sanctified “in spots and streaks,” Robison observed, but for over thirty-five years “I never saw anything manifested in [Sam Page] but a truly sanctified spirit.”¹⁰ I see something else in this story of equal importance: the secret to his great success as an evangelist. Brother Page understood his calling

⁶ “Picnics and Reunions,” *PHA*, April 16, 1924, 5; “Memorial Issue,” *PHA*, 2-3.

⁷ “Memorial Issue,” *PHA*, 2; Sarah M. Payne to S. D. Page, unpublished correspondence, September 1, 1903.

⁸ “Memorial Issue,” *PHA*, 2-3.

⁹ “Memorial Issue,” *PHA*, 2.

¹⁰ “Memorial Issue,” *PHA*, 2-3.

apostolically. His burden was to plant Holy Ghost vineyards in places where the enemy's crop of weeds had choked out all Gospel life. God had commissioned him to go to war with the devil in out-of-the-way communities that better-known evangelists would never visit. He was a warrior called to battle, not an entertainer. And he knew that his greatest weapon was not polished preaching but prevailing prayer.

Our earliest glimpses of Sam Page's meetings come from reports to the *Way of Faith* in the mid-1890s, and from these we learn that each place he pitched his tent became a battleground. Here is a sampling of his reports:

- From Cool Springs, South Carolina: He and co-worker W. W. Avant had a battle there, but at least 75-100 had been saved, reclaimed, or sanctified. "The devil had his guns mounted and his forces marshaled; we obeyed the command, marched around the city, blew the ram's horns and shouted; claimed the city on the promises of God and the walls came down. Inhabitants put to flight; the banner of victory unfurled with Holiness Unto the Lord." In some services, the evangelists did not have the chance to preach because of the seekers crowding around the altar during the singing. Not all the victories occurred under the tent. Some were saved on the road and some at home.¹¹
- From Forney, South Carolina: "No opposition, all churches united, and the spirit was poured out on them, and many of their sons and daughters prophesied." One woman laughed and shouted for three days. Her husband grew so distressed "that she was going crazy that he sat up and cried half the night." But before the meeting ended he became one of 38 converted. There were 24 sanctified. And five "hardened."¹²
- From Purdy, North Carolina: "Greater power was demonstrated more than I ever saw it": "over a hundred saved, sanctified, baptized with fire, and healed. Several went into trances." Some tried to run away but were drawn into the tent "through the power of God. . .and entirely sanctified."¹³

If Sam Page could not preach, then why were fifty, seventy-five, even one hundred people saved, sanctified, healed, or baptized with the Holy Ghost and fire nearly every place where he set up his tent? Rarely did he witness fewer than twenty-five experiences in his meetings. And when he did, he was not happy. For example, one week-long campaign in Gaddysville, North Carolina yielded only "seven converted, two sanctified, and one reclaimed. The meeting was not as good as it could have been," Page reluctantly reported. "Not much opposition but lots of indifference."¹⁴

At least once, Sam Page left a meeting completely empty handed. He rose to his feet to issue an altar call after W. W. Avant had preached in a Magnolia, North Carolina schoolhouse on a Sunday afternoon in 1901: "Who wants to be saved, sanctified, baptized with the HG, baptized with fire, or with dynamite?" There was no response. After a period of uncomfortable silence, Brother Page posed another question: "Who needs any more religion that they already have?" No one came forward; not even one hand was lifted in the air. Undeterred, Page boldly offered this prayer in the hearing of the unresponsive gathering:

¹¹ *The Way of Faith*, November 6, 1895, 5; November 13, 1895, 5.

¹² *The Way of Faith*, January 29, 1896, 5.

¹³ *The Way of Faith*, November 25, 1896, 5.

¹⁴ *The Way of Faith*, February 19, 1896, 4.

“O Lord, I thank thee that I have found one congregation in the world who have all the religion they need.” Though Sam Page may deemed his efforts in Magnolia unfruitful, the humble preacher known for planting pecan trees wherever he lived and watermelon seeds whenever he traveled, planted one important spiritual seed that day when a young George Floyd Taylor heard for the first time of a blessing of power subsequent to sanctification.¹⁵

Whether as an independent holiness evangelist for four years or as a member of the Fire-Baptized Holiness Church from 1897 until the 1911 merger or thereafter an evangelist for the Pentecostal Holiness Church until his death in 1934, Sam Page never lost the keen sense that his calling was to do battle for souls—to pray through until he accessed the power needed to break the hold of the devil—power sufficient to pull the unregenerate back from the brink of hell and power sufficient to set regenerated people free from the grip of this world.

We find a good example of this in a 1906 report Brother Page sent to the *Live Coals* at the conclusion of a tent meeting he conducted in Eastman, Georgia with Thurman Cary: Closed “a battle of two weeks here last night. The devil is well-fortified here; his entrenchments and fort are well-built, but we got a few bombs to take effect, and grape and canister did some deadly work. We also did some sharp-shooting to the demolition of his kingdom. He has told the people around here to believe there is a Jesus and be baptized and they will be saved; takes them into what he calls the church, and let’s them graze on what they please, and, as a shepherd, calls anything they eat good pasture, even when they graze on Beelzebub’s lawn, if they drink whiskey, play cards, desecrate the Sabbath or anything else, . . . he says it is alright, just so long you are baptized. I told them that this was hatched in hell, and the hen that hatched the ‘biddies’ would carry them back there at roosting time.”¹⁶

This kind of preaching made some mad before they got glad. M. D. Sellers, who came to call Brother Page his “spiritual father,” admitted that when he first heard the man preach salvation and sanctification that he did not like “a bone in his body.” In fact, he ran from the tent in a rage, but on the way down the road he had terrifying visions that drove him back to the tent. And from the moment “I fell in the altar and God saved me,” I loved “Brother Page . . . better than any person on earth, aside from my own family.” In fact, Sellers reported, “My wife accused me of loving Brother Page more than I loved her. It was his godly life I loved so much.”¹⁷

M. D. Sellers loved Sam Page’s combination of personal humility, bold preaching, and sacrificial love for the hurting. Brothers Sellers also admired his uncompromising dedication to the particular application of holiness principles: not eating food prepared on Sunday, not taking medicine when sick, not even shining his shoes on the Lord’s Day. Brother Page once walked thirty miles to preach on a Sunday night, Sellers recalled, because his Saturday train was delayed and could not arrive at his destination until after midnight. So he got off the train, slept where he could, and headed out on foot at daybreak.¹⁸

In Sam Page’s mind, this severe level of purity was vital to maintain the anointing necessary to bombard the devil’s strongholds. One obvious way that Brother Page protected his purity was through his

¹⁵ George Floyd Taylor, “Our Church History, Chapter V: Organizing,” *PHA*, February 7, 1921, 10.

¹⁶ November 28, 1906, 4.

¹⁷ M. D. Sellers, unpublished memoir; “Memorial Issue,” *PHA*, 9-10.

¹⁸ “Memorial Issue,” *PHA*, 9-10.

commitment to teamwork and accountability in his evangelistic work. In every Sam Page meeting you would see at least one co-worker ministering with him. And whenever possible, his wife Emma traveled with him too.

In every Sam Page campaign, those in attendance could also count on at least one “healing service,” usually held toward the end of the meeting once enough people had embraced his message of purity and power that he could organize a prayer band (over which he usually appointed a newly-converted woman). This group helped him battle doubt and build faith in the community so effectively that the healing service often witnessed the conversion of some of that town’s vilest sinners.

Another feature in many of Sam Page’s tent meetings was the appearance of a woman preacher. He just loved woman preachers and rejoiced at the opportunity to turn his pulpit over to one. These examples come from his tent crusades in the summer of 1896:

- At Hub, North Carolina: A “good sister,” a Missionary Baptist from north helped Page and Avant “stand firm in the battle” and they let her preach a “fire-baptized” message for several services. Sam Page clearly enjoyed seeing the crowd’s reaction to sight of a Baptist woman preaching. Even better, she was a Baptist woman preaching holiness—and a Yankee! The saints in Hub were being tested. All true Christians, he wrote, will work together for souls “regardless of what sect their name belongs to or what sex they are.”¹⁹
- At Long Branch, South Carolina: “We had a dear Baptist sister preach for us four times.” Her face “lit up with heavenly love and won all classes to her and killed the opposition to women preachers.”²⁰
- At Lumberton, North Carolina: Mattie Perry joined W. W. Avant and the Pages in a meeting. Sam described her as a “grand little woman, . . . every ounce given to God.” He marveled at the number of people who were healed when she preached or who laid their gold jewelry on the altar when she spoke on supporting foreign missions. Consequently, he gave her most of the services.²¹

Sam Page was more than willing to share his pulpit with anyone he perceived to be called and anointed by God without regard to gender, appearance, or denominational connection. But at least once in each tent meeting—if not more than once—Brother Page would deliver his testimony. He typically prefaced his riveting story with a song: “Come on board and ship for glory / Be in haste, make up your mind / For our vessel’s weighing anchor / You will soon be left behind.” Then he would start by telling his audience that before he met Jesus he was the meanest man and worst infidel in North Carolina.²²

We are blessed that the noted holiness preacher and scholar W. B. Godbey once preached with Sam Page and chose to describe Sam’s preaching style in his widely-read 1909 *Autobiography*: Back in 1896, Godbey remembered, “I went to North Carolina [to preach]. At the opening I was introduced to my comrade in labor, Sam Page, a former notorious infidel and drunken saloon-keeper, whose profligacy

¹⁹ *The Way of Faith*, July 8, 1896, 5.

²⁰ *The Way of Faith*, August 5, 1896, 5.

²¹ *The Way of Faith*, September 16, 1896, 1, 5.

²² “Memorial Issue,” *PHA*, 2.

and wickedness had been proverbial in all the land. Having been wonderfully converted and gloriously sanctified, responsive to his heavenly calling he was then a flaming evangelist, shaking that country with the Pentecostal power, which, in the mercy of God, characterized his ministry. The power descended on us [each night] and waves of salvation began to roll over the audience, revealing Him who is mighty to save. Simultaneously with the rolling billows, Sam would leap on a bench and shout aloud, "Look here, all ye drunkards, gamblers, blasphemers, thieves, murderers, and adulterers, and see me. Do you not know that I am Sam Page, the saloon-keeper, drunkard, blasphemer, gambler and infidel? See what God will do for you if you will repent of your sins and seek Him with all your heart as I did. Oh, He will wonderfully save and gloriously sanctify you!"

Inspired by the startling boldness of his tall, raw-boned preaching partner, the diminutive Godby leapt on the bench, threw his arms around Sam Page, and shouted to the people: "Look at me, O ye good [church members] Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians and Campbellites, who keep the moral law and walk irreproachably before the world, but have never been born from above, regenerated by the Holy Ghost, and know not what it is to receive a new heart. I was once where you are and as surely on my way to Hell as Sam Page in his saloon. . . ." ²³

Now we have met Sam Page. In putting flesh and spirit the on bare bones of his list of appointments and accomplishments, "S. D. Page" will no longer be just a lifeless name listed in our chronicles. He will be Sam Page the saved and sanctified ex-barkeeper who loved women preachers, who refused to shine his muddy shoes between meetings on Sunday, who gave his best suits and often his last dime to encourage his fellow preachers, who laid in the woods all day wrestling in prayer with principalities and powers in high places, and who jumped up a bench when the Spirit of conviction started to swept through his tent and filled the altars through the power of his testimony. And once you have met Sam Page you have yet one more window opened on the spirituality of the early Pentecostal Holiness Church.

Before closing, I want to get rather personal and dig into Sam Page's pockets. He generally had a crumpled bag of watermelon seeds and a few dollars resting there uncomfortably together. Florence Goff said that he would stop at the oddest places and run to the side of the road to dig a shallow hole. Returning to the wagon or car he would say with a big smile, "Someone will get a melon bye and bye." And before long, she added, he would find some needy preacher or sinner and plant his money in the soil of their affliction. ²⁴

It strikes me that all of Sam Page's life he was planting seeds.

- Seeds of conviction. Seeds of salvation.
- Seeds of holiness. Seeds of hope.
- Seeds of correction. Seeds of encouragement.
- Seeds of warfare. Seeds of healing.

²³ *The Autobiography of William Baxter Godbey* (Cincinnati: God's Revivalist Press, 1909), 12-13.

²⁴ "Memorial Issue," *PHA*, 10-11.

I close by mentioning one other seed that Sam Page planted back in 1911. Not long after the merger, he was preaching in the hills of South Carolina. In addition to speaking about the need for pardon, purity, and power, he also planted the idea that every Christian has the responsibility to give sacrificially of his or her possessions to reach the lost and hurting people of the world. He was always raising money for some ministry—a printing press, a missions project, an orphanage. On this day he described the plight of the poor orphans at who were currently being gathered to the town where he lived. One girl was so moved that she went straight home, boxed up her extensive collection of dolls (even her very favorite one), and asked her father to ship them as soon as possible to the Falcon Children’s Home. That young girl named Lila grew up to become the first President of the Women’s Auxiliary and the founder of the Harvest Train.²⁵ Long after Sam Page’s death, Lila Berry was still planting some of his seeds. Every gift brought in on the Harvest Train represents another of Brother Page’s melons coming up for someone to enjoy “bye and bye.”

I trust that you have enjoyed meeting Sam Page, the man elected here by his peers one hundred years ago to serve as our first General Superintendent. Now that we know him better, may we too carry a bag of his Fire-Baptized and Pentecostal Holiness seeds around with us in our pockets—and may we be as willing to allow the Holy Spirit to interrupt our hectic days and lead us to the very spot by the side of the road where we need to kneel down in the dirt and plant them.

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²⁵ Blanche Leon King, “A Leader Beloved,” *PHA*, February 20, 1947, 12.