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CHARLES STANLEY'S PENTECOSTAL ROOTS

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Abstract

Charles Stanley, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, is probably best known for his television program *In Touch with Dr. Charles Stanley*. Yet few know about Stanley's early formation in Pentecostal circles. This article examines Stanley's early formation in these circles and the role these Pentecostal roots have played in his ministry as a Southern Baptist minister.

Introduction

Charles Stanley, Pastor of the First Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, is probably the best-known Baptist minister in America since the death of Billy Graham. His television ministry, *In Touch with Dr. Charles Stanley*, is seen in nearly every major television market and viewed by millions of people each week. By 2006 *In Touch* could be heard in 107 languages worldwide. He has also authored over forty books, many which have been religious best sellers. His publisher, Thomas Nelson, estimates that over 3.5 million copies of his books have been sold. He also served two terms as President of the Southern Baptist Convention. Under his leadership Atlanta First Baptist Church has grown to over 15,000 members. With his strong Baptist identity, few people know about Stanley's Pentecostal roots, which have deeply influenced his life and ministry.¹

Charles Frazier Stanley was born on September 25, 1932, in the rural farming community of Dry Fork, Virginia, near the city of Danville, Virginia. His parents, Charley and Rebecca Stanley, were members of the local Emmanuel Pentecostal Holiness Church, a congregation co-founded by his grandfather George

Washington Stanley.² Since his father died when Charles was only nine months old, he never knew his father and was raised by his mother who later moved to Danville and worked in the Dan River Mills to support her family. Despite their poverty, Rebecca faithfully paid tithes to her church. Charles Stanley was deeply moved by his mother's prayers and deep faith in God. As he grew up, Stanley delivered newspapers to 125 homes in Danville, both morning and evening editions, to add to the family income. He arose at 5:00 A.M. for his first deliveries. As a result he earned poor grades in school, which he deeply regretted. During this time Stanley suffered from severe loneliness since he was by himself at home much of the time.³

Charles Stanley as a Young Pentecostal

In his teenage years, Charles was a member of the North Danville Pentecostal Holiness Church on Main Street, pastored by F. A. Dail, a pioneer Pentecostal Holiness minister. Here he heard sermons on the “cardinal doctrines” of the church, which included salvation, sanctification as a second blessing, the baptism in the Holy Spirit evidenced by speaking in tongues, divine healing, and the imminent second coming of Christ. He also saw the fervent altar calls where people loudly sought for the “deeper experiences.” Dail was known for supporting the owners in the hard-fought Dan River Mills strike in 1930–1931 while pastoring the Schoolfield Pentecostal Holiness Church near Danville. Dan River Mills was the largest textile mill in the nation and a prime target for labor unions. The union lost the battle. Because of his outspoken sermons against the unions and the violence of the strikers, his church was dynamited. A few months later, after the 4,000 workers returned to work, the mill owners donated money for Dail to build a new church.⁴

At the age of 12, Stanley was converted to Christ in the Danville Church and began a Christian life of deep prayer and devotion. Despite his active prayer life, he later confessed, “I spent the early years of my Christian life struggling. Call it carnal; call it fleshly; call it whatever you wish. It was anything but wonderful.”⁵ In spite of his struggles, young Stanley also felt a definite call to preach. It is not known if he experienced second blessing sanctification or the baptism in the Holy Spirit with speaking in tongues, as taught by his church, at this time. The three most important influences in his life in this period were his mother, Rebecca, his Sunday school teacher, Craig Stowe, and his grandfather, George Washington Stanley.

Early Influences

Stanley's mother, Rebecca, was a staunch Pentecostal woman who always led family prayer on their knees with young Charles. For the rest of his life, Stanley would always pray on his knees at bedtime. His mother worked hard to support him on her meager salary at Dan River Mills. As a child Charles and his mother lived in fourteen different rented houses in Danville. Another great influence on young Charles was his Sunday school teacher, Craig Stowe. A very kind and loving man, Stowe took an interest in Stanley and even bought newspapers from him on the streets although he already had the paper at home. Stowe was a prominent layman in the Western North Carolina Conference of the Pentecostal Holiness Church serving as Sunday School Director for the Conference. Stowe was the father figure and role model that young Charles never had at home. In later years Stanley said that Stowe was "an incredible man of faith whom I loved dearly and inspired me profoundly." He also called Stowe his "spiritual father."⁶

His Grandfather George Washington Stanley

An even greater influence was his preacher grandfather, George Washington Stanley (1876–1965), who was born near Siler City, North Carolina. George was a pioneer Pentecostal Holiness preacher who was instrumental in planting eighteen Pentecostal Holiness churches in Virginia and North Carolina, including the Dry Fork church where Charles was born and the Danville church where he grew up. As an impoverished and illiterate young man, his grandfather was called to preach and learned to read by reading the Bible. George was raised and converted in a Baptist church, but was soon expelled when he began to preach the Wesleyan doctrine of "entire sanctification." His first holiness influence was in a tent meeting with a Pilgrim Holiness preacher where he was sanctified in 1898. He never went to high school or college although he once considered attending W. B. Godby's Pilgrim Holiness Bible School in Cincinnati, Ohio. George Stanley preached his first sermon in 1902. Later he was licensed to preach in the Wesleyan Methodist Church.⁷

In 1906, George heard about the Pentecostal experience and soon was baptized in the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues. Because of his tongues experience, he was excommunicated from the Wesleyan Methodist Church but continued preaching under his gospel tent. In time he came into contact with the

Pentecostal Holiness people in Mount Olive, North Carolina. He was ordained in the North Carolina Conference of the Pentecostal Holiness Church in 1911 and became a powerful preacher, pastor, and church planter.⁸ In time he bought a larger tent and evangelized wherever he could find an opportunity. Among the other strong Pentecostal Holiness churches he planted were the Buena Vista Church and the Natural Bridge Church in Virginia.⁹

Young Charles idolized his grandfather and loved to talk with him and glean wisdom from his years of ministry. He said of him, “[T]his is the most spiritual person I’ve ever talked to. He impacted my life profoundly. I was like a sponge soaking up everything he said.” Charles described his grandfather as

a quiet and easygoing man, but when he got to preaching, there was no stopping him. He was absolutely on fire, bold, fervent, and courageous for the Lord. The Spirit of God shook that small Pentecostal church and the people prayed loudly and long after he was done preaching the message. God worked through him in an awesome way.¹⁰

One thing his grandfather told him stuck with Charles Stanley for his entire life. It was, “Charles, if God tells you to run your head through a brick wall, you head for the wall, and when you get there, God will make a hole for it.”¹¹ G. W. Stanley was a man who had dreams and visions and claimed the gift of healing. Once a girl born blind was healed after he said, “I demand that your eyes be opened.” They both began to speak in tongues. He also promised that he would “trust God with my body” for healing. Although he suffered many maladies, he refused to take medicine for forty-five years.¹² Once, while trying to earn money to buy a tent, he had a vision of a town with a house on the corner. He was told to

get on a train, go to a certain town, get off the train, and go to the south side of town. He showed me a house with rose bushes and trees in the yard. It was located on the corner of the street. The Lord showed me that I should go there, to go down the hall, and in the door to the left. There he showed me an old lady sitting in the corner. There was a handbag on the wall and there I would get the money to buy my tent.¹³

G. W. Stanley followed the directions exactly and when he entered the door, a woman handed him a bag with 300 dollar bills inside. Just the amount he needed to buy his first tent.

Life Changes

Charles Stanley's life changed drastically when his mother married John Hall when Charles was nine years old. Rebecca's new husband was a rude, bitter, and abusive alcoholic. Charles said about this situation, "I never felt completely safe walking into our home. I was never sure what he might do or what would set off his uncontrolled anger. So when I was in the house I wanted to be out of it." It was then that he would go down to the church basement where "I could pray all I wanted to—as loudly and for however long I needed to just as I learned to do in the Pentecostal Holiness Church. But down in that basement it was just me and God."¹⁴

After he was converted, young Charles definitely felt a call to preach, so he carefully studied and read his Bible looking forward to preaching his first sermon. That came when he was seventeen years old in the North Danville Pentecostal Holiness Church. He felt led to preach from Genesis 3 on the topic "Where Art Thou?" Before the service his mother noticed that he was concerned about speaking before such a large crowd, so she quoted a passage to him from Joshua 1:7–9 that was to follow him throughout his life. It ended with these words: "Be strong and courageous. Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." He remembered what happened next: "As soon as I walked up to the pulpit the message began to flow. God gave me the words to say in a manner that surprised and delighted me. I can't express the absolute joy I felt knowing that the Holy Spirit was in control and the Father was speaking through me."¹⁵

Soon after this, Charles was influenced by his high school girlfriend, Barbara Ann, to attend the nearby Moffett Memorial Baptist Church pastored by David Hammock. He found many of his high school friends at the church and enjoyed the sermons of pastor Hammock. Charles explained his reason for becoming a Baptist: "[T]he Pastor of the Pentecostal Holiness Church, F. A. Dail, had retired and I was longing for a change. So I asked my mother if she approved, and she replied, '[I]f you can live as holy a life in the Baptist church as in the Pentecostal Holiness Church, then it's all right with me.'¹⁶

Since he was called to preach Charles wanted to go to college to prepare for the ministry, but he had no money. The people in the Pentecostal Holiness Church

had shown little interest in raising money for him. However, the kindly Baptist pastor arranged for Charles to receive a full-ride scholarship to attend the Baptist-related university in Richmond, from which he graduated in 1954. Here, despite the extremely liberal professors, his reluctant conversion from Pentecostalism to Southern Baptist theology occurred.¹⁷

Later in seminary in discussions with a fellow student, Charles referred to the Holy Spirit as an “it.” He was sternly told that the Holy Spirit was a “He,” not an “it.” Later Stanley said, “I grew up in a church where He was never mentioned. My pastor didn’t explain who He was or preach sermons about Him. In seminary I learned that the Holy Spirit was a ‘He’ and not an ‘it.’ Having been raised in the Pentecostal Holiness Church, I had always heard the Holy Spirit or the Holy Ghost referred to as ‘it.’”¹⁸ Yet he remembered seekers at the altars fervently praying for the baptism in the Holy Spirit with the expected Pentecostal sign of speaking in tongues. Also at Richmond he met his wife Anna Margaret Johnson and they were married in 1955. Later they both attended Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.¹⁹

In time Stanley rejected his Pentecostal upbringing with the strong emphasis on second blessing sanctification and the baptism in the Holy Spirit as a “third blessing.” On the other hand he became a strong proponent of the Baptist view on eternal security and the teaching that baptism in the Holy Spirit came at conversion without the evidence of speaking in tongues. In fact he became a fervent cessationist despite his Pentecostal roots.²⁰ To complete his transition, Charles Stanley was ordained into the ministry of the Southern Baptist denomination on August 19, 1956, at the Moffett Memorial Baptist Church in Danville, Virginia.²¹

Baptist Pastorates and Deeper Experiences

For the next few years, from 1957 to 1969, Stanley pastored four Baptist churches where he honed his preaching style. They were: the Fruitland Baptist Church in North Carolina; Fairburn, Ohio; and later in Miami and Bartow, Florida. In 1957 while in Fruitland, Stanley felt a need for a deeper work of God in his life and began earnestly seeking to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Although he testified to being baptized in the Holy Spirit when he was converted, he believed that one could still be “filled” with the Spirit at any time. After much impassioned prayer while lying on his back, he suddenly experienced a “life changing moment” of being filled with the Holy Spirit. After “I had prayed, begged, bargained, and

pleaded, . . . I was overwhelmed with a sense of confidence and assurance. . . . I didn't see stars or hear a voice, I didn't speak in tongues.”²² He called it his “D Day.” “I wept, overwhelmed with joy that I no longer had to live the Christian life or do ministry in my own strength.” He added, “[B]ut from that moment forward, everything in my life was transformed—my preaching, service, leadership, problem solving—everything.” Even his wife noticed the difference. “It's like my husband is a different man,” she said.²³

Seven years later in 1964 while pastoring the Miami First Baptist Church, Stanley had another vivid spiritual experience that the Pentecostals would call a work of entire sanctification. He said, “For a long time I had a hunch that something was missing in my life but I couldn't put my finger on it. I had a nagging suspicion that there was more to the Christian life than I was experiencing but I didn't know where to turn for the answer.” He went on to say that there were “several secret sins in my life. Things that no one knew about. Nothing out of the ordinary. But things I knew were displeasing to God.”²⁴

After reading a book by V. Raymond Edman, *They Found the Secret*, on how Hudson Taylor had an experience of “abiding in the vine,” he said:

When I finished the section on Hudson Taylor, I dropped to my knees there on the cold concrete floor and began to cry. . . . I was on my knees for almost three hours just crying and thanking God for opening my eyes to this wonderful truth. When I got up, I was a new man. . . . It was now Christ working through the Holy Spirit, producing character in me. What a relief! A huge burden was lifted off my shoulders that afternoon. And I walked out of my study a free man.²⁵

Atlanta First Baptist Church

Armed with these deeper spiritual experiences, in 1969 Stanley reluctantly accepted a call to move to First Baptist Church in Atlanta to serve as the associate pastor to Roy McLain, a very liberal pastor by Baptist standards. He soon found that this church was a “hornet's nest” of unrest and division. His reception was poor and cold. The “Executive Committee,” a group of seven lay leaders who had micromanaged the church for years, detested Stanley and was determined that he would not become the senior pastor when McLain retired. They particularly disliked his fervent conservative views and biblical preaching and pressured him to resign. When they learned of his Pentecostal roots they called him a “holy roller.”

They soon brought in other preachers to interview for the pastor's position. Stanley called them the "gang of seven" that "made me feel like an outcast at the church."²⁶

Things came to a head on a Sunday morning in 1971 when Stanley arrived at the church to find that his opponents had put anti-Stanley leaflets on each seat. After the sermon, Stanley gave an altar call. He was surprised to see 300 opponents heading for the exits while 2,000 Stanley supporters came forward to the altar. It was a stunning and overwhelming victory for the embattled preacher. In a later Wednesday night business meeting when the church gathered to vote for a new senior pastor, the chairman of the Executive Committee spoke against Stanley's candidacy and used profanity in his speech. When Stanley intervened and said that this was improper language for the pulpit, the chairman slugged Stanley in the face. Stanley did not respond. Pandemonium broke out as strong men stormed the platform to defend their pastor. When the decision came, Stanley received sixty-five percent of the vote. His enraged opponents later left First Baptist to start another church after Stanley appointed new sympathetic leadership for the congregation.²⁷

If ever a church was divided and grievously wounded, it was Atlanta First Baptist Church. However, in a short time the newly-united church began to grow immensely and soon had to buy more property in downtown Atlanta to hold the crowds. In 1972 Stanley started a new television ministry in Atlanta called *The Chapel Hour* that attracted even more people to the church. In 1990 Stanley organized a new national television ministry called *In Touch with Charles Stanley* that made him a nationally and internationally important figure. When the church grew to over 15,000 members, the old downtown property was too small to hold the crowds, so a search was made to find a larger campus. In 1992 the church moved into the immense former Avon Southeastern Distribution Center in the Atlanta suburb of Dunwoody where a new sanctuary was remodeled to hold the huge crowds that came to hear him preach. It also became the set for the *In Touch* broadcasts.²⁸

With his ever-increasing load of preaching, teaching, and his television ministry, Stanley became overwhelmed with his work. He confessed that after moving to Atlanta "I became married to the ministry and began to neglect my family. It took me several years to get things back in order."²⁹ This involved problems with his marriage to Annie and his relations with his son Andy Stanley, who had become a successful megachurch pastor in his own right. His marital problems came to a head when Annie obtained a divorce from Charles in May 2000 despite his efforts to heal their marriage. Andy strongly opposed the divorce. Despite the divorce, Stanley remained as pastor of First Baptist and never remarried.³⁰

Retouching His Pentecostal Roots

With all his success as pastor of a megachurch and a major television personality, Stanley never forgot his Pentecostal roots. In most of his books he acknowledged his upbringing in the Pentecostal Holiness Church and wrote glowingly of his grandfather George Washington Stanley. In 2008 on the ninetieth anniversary of the Dry Fork Emmanuel Pentecostal Holiness Church, he came and preached in honor of his grandfather who helped found the church. He also visited the graves of his father and mother who lay buried in the church cemetery. Again, in 2018, he returned to celebrate the centennial of the church. Here he preached the Sunday morning sermon and renewed old acquaintances from his childhood days.³¹

Earlier, in 2017, he blessed Emmanuel College in nearby Franklin Springs, Georgia, a school he might have attended had he not joined the Baptist Church, by giving a large scholarship donation to the school. Also in 2017 he celebrated his eighty-fifth birthday with a gala party in Atlanta. Attending this event were Dr. Douglas Beacham, the Presiding Bishop of the Pentecostal Holiness Church, and several other leaders of the denomination. As a token of appreciation for his courageous ministry, the Pentecostal Holiness Church presented pastor Stanley with a proclamation plaque recognizing his ministry at First Baptist Atlanta and showing support for his continuing worldwide ministry. In a rare stroke of ecclesiastical statesmanship, the tribute to Stanley was as follows:

International Pentecostal Holiness Church Official Proclamation

WHEREAS, Today we celebrate the life of Charles F. Stanley of Atlanta, Georgia, the son of Charley and Rebecca Stanley and originally of Dry Fork, Virginia; who earned bachelor's degrees from the University of Richmond and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and master's and doctoral degrees in theology from Luther Rice Seminary, and

WHEREAS, Dr. Charles F. Stanley accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior, was born-again at age twelve, began his life of ministry at the young age of fourteen, and has faithfully preached the gospel for the past seventy-one years, serving in various national ministry positions, including twice as the president of the Southern Baptist Convention, and

WHEREAS, Dr. Charles F. Stanley has provided excellent leadership and vision by serving as senior pastor of First Baptist Church of Atlanta, Georgia, for forty-six years, and is deeply devoted to his congregation, and provides stable, passionate, Christ-centered leadership, and

WHEREAS, Dr. Charles F. Stanley is a *New York Times* best-selling author and is the founder and president of In Touch Ministries, an international ministry, which can be heard and seen on more than 2,600 radio and television stations and reaches millions of households around the world weekly with the mission “to lead people worldwide into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and to strengthen the local church,”

THEREFORE, the Executive Committee of the Council of Bishops of the International Pentecostal Holiness Church, headquartered in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and its governing bodies mark September 25, 2017, Dr. Charles F. Stanley’s 85th birthday, as an official day of recognition and celebration of his life and significant achievements. Dr. Stanley’s living example demonstrates one can truly know the Father’s will, obey the Holy Spirit’s leading, and accept His sovereign plan for one’s life. This example is recognized by the International Pentecostal Holiness Church and is celebrated in the presence of Dr. Charles F. Stanley on this special day. We, the Executive Committee of the International Pentecostal Holiness Church, extend our prayers and desire for God’s richest blessing on Dr. Charles F. Stanley, his family, and his international ministry.

Presiding Bishop Dr. A. D. Beacham, Jr., IPHC General
Superintendent
Bishop J. Talmadge Gardner, Executive Director of World Missions
Ministries
Bishop Thomas H. McGhee, Executive Director of Discipleship
Ministries, IPHC Vice Chairman
Bishop Garry Bryant, Executive Director of Evangelism USA

Vinson Synan was most recently Scholar in Residence and Director of the PhD Program at Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA, where he also served as Interim Dean of the College of Theology and Ministry in 2016–17. Previously, he was Dean of the Divinity School, Regent University, Virginia Beach, Virginia, USA.



Notes

¹ Charles Stanley's most autobiographical books are: Charles Stanley, *Courageous Faith: My Story from a Life of Obedience* (New York: Howard Books, 2016); Charles Stanley, *How to Handle Adversity* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989); Charles Stanley, *The Wonderful Spirit Filled Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995); and Charles Stanley, *How to Listen to God* (Nashville: Oliver-Nelson, 1985). Two major histories of the Pentecostal Holiness Church are: Vinson Synan, *The Old-Time Power: A Centennial History of the International Pentecostal Holiness Church* (Franklin Springs, Georgia: Lifesprings Resources, 1998); and A. D. Beacham, Jr., *A Brief History of the Pentecostal Holiness Church* (Franklin Springs, Georgia: Lifesprings Resources, 1983).

² G. W. Stanley reported on the Dry Fork revivals in the church paper. See *The Pentecostal Holiness Advocate*, August 1, 1918, p. 7, and January 16, 1919, p. 12.

³ George W. Stanley, *My Life's Experiences for God* (Franklin Springs, GA: Publishing House, n.d.), 20–25. Also see Charles Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 9–25.

⁴ Synan, *Old-Time Power*, 188.

⁵ Charles Stanley, *Wonderful Spirit Filled Life*, xi.

⁶ Charles Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 48.

⁷ G. W. Stanley, "My Life's Experiences for God," 4–8, 12.

⁸ See *Proceedings of the 12th Annual Convention of the Pentecostal Holiness Church of North Carolina, 1911*, 6. He was listed as pastor of the Star Mission and the Maple Springs Mission (8).

⁹ In the Buena Vista revival G. W. Stanley reported the following statistics: 150 saved, 125 sanctified, 80 baptized in the Holy Spirit, 122 water baptized, and 146 joined the new church. See G. W. Stanley, "My Life's Experiences for God," 25–27. Also see "The First 50 Years with the First Pentecostal Holiness Church, Buena Vista, Virginia, 1920–1970," n.d., n.p., International Pentecostal Holiness Church Archives, Bethany, OK; and "History Highlights of the Natural Bridge Pentecostal Holiness Church: 50th Anniversary, 1919–1969, n.d., n.p., International Pentecostal Holiness Church Archives, Bethany, OK.

- ¹⁰ Charles Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 50–51.
- ¹¹ Charles Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 54.
- ¹² G. W. Stanley, “My Life’s Experiences,” 30–31.
- ¹³ G. W. Stanley, “My Life’s Experiences,” 16–17.
- ¹⁴ Charles Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 34.
- ¹⁵ Charles Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 72.
- ¹⁶ Charles Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 70.
- ¹⁷ Charles Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 74.
- ¹⁸ Charles Stanley, *The Wonderful Spirit Filled Life*, 13–17.
- ¹⁹ Charles Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 79–84.
- ²⁰ See Charles Stanley, *Wonderful Spirit Filled Life*. In quoting the list of the gifts of the Spirit in 1 Cor 12:1–4 he omits tongues and interpretation of tongues (127), and he agreed with Billy Graham that “there is only one baptism with the Holy Spirit in the life of every believer, and that takes place at the moment of conversion” (157–58)
- ²¹ Charles Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 74.
- ²² Charles Stanley, *Wonderful Spirit Filled Life*, 37–38.
- ²³ Charles Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 119–20
- ²⁴ Charles Stanley, *Wonderful Spirit Filled Life*, 55.
- ²⁵ Charles Stanley, *Wonderful Spirit Filled Life*, 59–60. This testimony of an experience of victory over sin was typical of what Pentecostal Holiness people experienced as a “second blessing” of entire sanctification. The only difference was that it came after Stanley was “filled with the Spirit” but not as a “second work of grace.”
- ²⁶ Charles Stanley, *How to Handle Adversity*, 23–24. Also see Charles Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 156–73.
- ²⁷ Charles Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 161–70.
- ²⁸ Charles Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 173–82.
- ²⁹ Charles Stanley, *How to Listen to God*, 41.
- ³⁰ Charles Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 204–12.
- ³¹ For photos of this event see, www.intouch.org/read/magazine/the-pulpit/enduring-witness.