

“Pentecostalism’s Greatest Test Could Be Her Finest Hour”

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Abstract

This article is drawn from an unpublished research paper titled “Understanding and Bridging the Racial Divide in Pentecostalism,” submitted to Dr. Vinson Synan in partial fulfillment of requirements for an AGTS course titled, “The Future of Pentecostalism.”

The article considers the current racial-political divide within Pentecostalism. It traces the history of race relations in Pentecostalism beginning at Azusa Street and culminating at the “Miracle in Memphis.” The main focus of the article is on the new difficulties in those relations stemming from political alignments and a tension between moral righteousness and social justice. The article touches on the consequences facing our nation if this divide within Pentecostalism is not healed. Yet it concludes with the optimistic assertion that Pentecostalism has the God-given means of bridging both its own racial divide and the racial divide in the nation. Thus, Pentecostalism’s greatest test can be its finest hour.

Pentecostalism’s Greatest Test Could Be Her Finest Hour

Like a splendidly embroidered tapestry with many colored threads, Pentecostalism is a multi-cultural movement numbering over 600 million believers worldwide. Grant

McClung cites the following demographics that characterize the Pentecostal phenomenon: (1) more urban than rural, (2) more female than male, (3) more Two-Thirds world than Western, (4) more impoverished than affluent and (5) younger than 18.¹ Pentecostalism’s adaptability to any and every culture is one of its greatest strengths and accounts for the rich diversity in the movement. However, within that diversity lies an inherent weakness—racial division. Harvey Cox, a long-time student of Pentecostalism, sees “deep divisions within the movement . . . arguments over theology, personality clashes, racial and social tensions.”²

Despite valiant efforts toward racial reconciliation in recent decades, American Pentecostalism faces a threat with new and different nuances. In addition to race, it involves political alignments and a tension between moral righteousness and social justice. This divide not only threatens Pentecostalism, it threatens the nation at large. However, the news is not all bad. The underlying premise of this article is that Pentecostalism holds the key to its own internal unity and the potential to bridge the great divide in our nation.

Understanding our Past: The Era of “Jim Crow”

Pentecostalism was born during a time of deep racial division in America. Following the Civil War, white majorities in the South

implemented the so-called “Jim Crow” laws that would dominate the southern social structure from 1897 to 1965. These state and local laws mandated racial segregation in all public facilities and subjected blacks to inferior benefits and sometimes fatal injustice. On average, sixty-five blacks were lynched each year during the first decade of the twentieth century.³ The very day revival services began at Azusa Street (April 14, 1906), an angry mob lynched three black men in the town square of Springfield, Missouri.⁴

An example of the tension between the races can be seen in the interaction between Charles Parham and William Seymour—two of the most well-known names in Pentecostal history. When the African-American Seymour applied for admission to Parham’s Bible Training School in Houston, Texas, Parham faced a dilemma. Local laws prohibited whites and blacks occupying the same classroom. Parham threaded this legal needle by allowing Seymour to listen to lectures from the hallway just outside the classroom. But Parham prohibited Seymour from ministering to whites and even excluded him from seeking the baptism in the Holy Spirit at his altar because of the presence of whites.⁵

To people in the twenty-first century who have grown up sensitive to the issue of racial equality, such behavior seems inexcusable. However, viewed through the lens of the times, it appears a bit more understandable. Historian Vinson Synan credits Parham for defying the spirit if not the letter of the law in his efforts to help Seymour.⁶ Regarding Parham and others like him, Cecil Robeck offers this enlightening and charitable comment: “[T]hey were ... men of their time ... white men ministering in the South.”

The Azusa Street Phenomenon and Seymour’s Disappointment

Los Angeles in 1906 was a rapidly-growing, multi-ethnic city whose largest minority was African-American—many of them educated, middle-class, and professional.⁷ Nevertheless, the intermingling of races and nationalities at the Azusa Street Mission that year challenged the sensibilities of even the most tolerant in the city. What began as a humble black church became, within a few months, a thriving and diverse missionary movement. The crowds were “‘composed of whites and blacks’ numbering ‘several hundred people’ with ‘scores of faces peering in from the windows,’” reported the *Los Angeles Times*.⁸ The Mission’s own paper reported, “The work began among the colored people. Since then multitudes have come. God makes no difference in nationality, Ethiopians, Chinese, Indians, Mexicans, and other nationalities worship together.”⁹ Even for Los Angeles such interracial mingling was a rare phenomenon that scandalized some and blessed others. Years later, Frank Bartleman, the chronicler of the Azusa Street revival, “exulted that at ‘Old Azusa ... the color line’ had been ‘washed away in the blood.’”¹⁰

This intermingling of the races was no surprise to Seymour, the church’s founding pastor. He had come to Los Angeles with just such a scenario in mind. Seymour had learned about the baptism in the Holy Spirit with its accompaniment of tongues from Parham, but he took Parham’s teaching a step further. He saw the “baptism” as the means to racial reconciliation. “In the context of Jim Crow, Seymour believed that the gift of tongues symbolized the worldwide unity of the Church and that Spirit baptism laid the groundwork for interracial healing and ethnic equality.”¹¹

Sadly, the beautiful racial harmony of Azusa Street did not last. “Tensions between African-Americans and Latinos, as well as among blacks and whites, led to friction and schism at the mission.”¹² These tensions were aggravated by the antics of some of Azusa’s leaders and mentors. When Parham visited Azusa, he was appalled at the sight of blacks and whites praying for one another, and openly criticized Seymour for allowing it. Eventually, some of Seymour’s white lieutenants abandoned him, and his “radical experiment” in interracial unity “failed because of the inability of whites to allow for a sustained role for black leadership.”¹³ By the end of the decade, the Azusa Street Mission was once again a small African-American congregation that would enjoy occasional visitations similar to 1906, but it would never realize Seymour’s vision for racial reconciliation. Seymour was left with a broken heart and an altered pneumatology. In his words, “The Spirit had been grieved” by the divisions that were largely the fault of his “white brethren” (although he acknowledged that some blacks played a role in them).¹⁴ Seymour began teaching that love, not tongues, was the real evidence of Spirit baptism.

Decades of Separation

The fragmentation and segregation that characterized the last days of the Azusa Street revival did not put an immediate end to all interracial activity within Pentecostalism. The Church of God in Christ (COGIC) was a black-led denomination whose constituency, until 1914, was half white.¹⁵ Unfortunately, due to intense social pressure coming from the wider culture such expressions of unity could not be sustained.

Two events serve as historical landmarks of Pentecostal segregation. First, the founding of the Assemblies of God in 1914 drew

hundreds of white ministers away from COGIC. Although Bishop Charles Mason, the founder of COGIC, was the featured speaker at the first General Council, the emergence of the new organization effectively ended fellowship between white and black Pentecostals. Second, the founding of the Pentecostal Fellowship of North America (PFNA) in 1948 formalized the practice of segregation. The eight denominations that gathered in Des Moines, Iowa, stated as their purpose: “to demonstrate to the world the essential unity of Spirit-baptized believers.”¹⁶ Ironically, not one African-American denomination had been invited to participate. By 1965, the PFNA had grown to seventeen denominations, with no African-American churches among them and no explanation as to why they were excluded.

The Miracle in Memphis

twentieth century records few efforts within Pentecostalism toward racial reconciliation. However, a landmark event occurred in Memphis, Tennessee in 1994—a conference called specifically for the purpose of racial reconciliation. The conference theme was “Pentecostal Partners: A Reconciliation Strategy for 21st Century Ministry.” Beyond the thrill of 3,000 black and white attendees coming together from many denominations, significant things happened in the conference. During the morning sessions, key leaders presented papers acknowledging culpability for the sins of prejudice and injustice. Evenings were full-powered Pentecostal-style worship services. On October 18, during the afternoon session, a message in tongues was followed by an impassioned interpretation by Jack Hayford. Immediately, a white pastor appeared on stage with a basin of water and proceeded to wash the feet of Bishop Clemmons while begging forgiveness for the sins of whites against blacks. Then Bishop Blake washed

the feet of Thomas Trask of the Assemblies of God while repenting for the animosity of blacks toward whites. These unplanned and unscripted events moved the entire audience to tears. The next day, Paul Walker of the Church of God called the event “the Miracle in Memphis,” a term that has identified the conference ever since.¹⁷

Two other things happened in Memphis. The all-white PFNA was dissolved and a new interracial organization was formed to replace it, the Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches of North America (PCCNA). Also, the people unanimously adopted a “Racial Reconciliation Manifesto.”¹⁸

The New Racial Divide: Politics

Despite these notable accomplishments, a serious division remains within American Pentecostalism. While this division still involves race, it focuses on political alignments. Whites lean toward a conservative point of view and blacks toward a liberal. Blacks align with Democrats and whites with Republicans. Cox says, “The political split in Pentecostalism is deep and—it seems—widening.”¹⁹

As pointed out earlier, Pentecostals never stray far from the larger culture in which they find themselves. The current divide runs through Pentecostalism because it runs through America, but the divide is also rooted in the way each side applies the concept of holiness.

Understanding the Issues: Moral Righteousness and Social Justice

Both black and white Pentecostals are descendents of the Holiness movement. Earlier Pentecostals saw holiness as an individual matter involving modesty and personal purity. Present-day Pentecostals see

it in larger terms. The majority of whites fight the battle for holiness through the great moral issues of the day—the sanctity of life and marriage. The majority of blacks, on the other hand, view holiness through the prism of social justice. Further compounding this division, the two major political parties have entered the fray, each championing one of these causes. Democrats embrace social justice issues and Republicans, matters of moral righteousness.

The Role of Pentecostals in the Election of Barack Obama

In 2008, this divide in American Pentecostalism became decidedly deeper and wider. The candidacy of Barack Obama for the office of President accentuated the issue of race in politics. Because Obama was a liberal Democrat who supported abortion rights, many white Pentecostals stood against his candidacy. Most black Pentecostals supported him for the reasons already stated. The fact that he was black further galvanized their support. Careful studies of election results show that Obama won the election in large part because of Pentecostal votes.²⁰ There are a number of reasons why so many Pentecostals voted for Obama. One of them is that

Pentecostals are the quintessential Democratic constituency—poor, female, southern and ethnic ... Although Obama knew he could not take the white Pentecostal vote, he also knew the growing socio-demographic shifts taking place in the Pentecostal community was [sic] transforming it into one of the most racially integrated religious constituencies in the U.S.²¹

Obama’s presidency has blurred the line between race and politics even more,

presenting yet another challenge to Pentecostal unity.

Present Challenge and Future Peril

Cox warns that due to these tensions, “Pentecostalism stands in grave danger of losing the invaluable message it could bring to the other churches and to the rest of the world.” He then poses the question, “What [has] happened to the spirit of Azusa Street?”²²

A more sobering question might be, “What will happen to race relations in America if Pentecostals do not bridge their own great divide?” Harold Hunter, a Pentecostal leader and co-editor of *Reconciliation*, says, “Dire predictions of coming race wars in the United States are ignored to the peril of our entire country.”²³ Bishop Gilbert Patterson of COGIC says, “Racial tensions are heating up almost as never before. Notice how this is the case even among our own Pentecostal ranks.”²⁴ Referring to the Memphis Miracle in 1994, he continues,

By 1996 there was a great “falling away.” The intensity of the spirit of fellowship was not there because we had taken our political positions. This means basically that the whites were allied with Republican conservatism and the blacks were allied with what is usually called Democratic liberals. It’s up to us as Pentecostals to find a way to place fellowship ahead of politics. If we don’t, I hope I won’t be around when whatever happens, happens.²⁵

Hunter defines the challenge facing Pentecostals: “It will not be possible—or desirable—to avoid controversy ... It is an unavoidable truism that our society divides us according to race, gender, class, age and the like. These deeply-entrenched rivalries

must be conquered by the healing power known well to Pentecostals.”²⁶

The Church’s Greatest Test?

The current racial-political division in Pentecostalism may be the Church’s greatest test. To meet the challenge, Pentecostals must address this question: “Is our loyalty to Christ and His body greater than our racial, cultural, and political loyalties?” As Pentecostal Christians, the issue is complicated because each side in the controversy believes its position represents God’s position. The solution to this dilemma may lie in the example of the first-century Church, which faced a similar test.

The Way Forward: Learning from the Early Church

The Jew-Gentile divide in the Early Church had characteristics similar to the current divide in Pentecostalism in that it involved more than racial and cultural differences. Jewish believers were bound by conscience to observe the Law of Moses, particularly the initiatory rite of circumcision. To them, it was “the Word of God”—as binding as the moral provisions of the Ten Commandments. When Gentiles were admitted to the Church without submitting to circumcision, major conflict ensued. The Jerusalem Council decided the matter (see Acts 15), but the Council did not end the controversy as continual flare-ups in the churches required patient instruction by the apostles. Paul’s classic passage in Ephesians on the organic unity of the Church is one example:

His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility ... Make every

effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Eph. 2:14-18; 4:3-6).²⁷

When the same controversy erupted in the church at Rome, Paul counseled: “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food” (Rom. 14:19-20). The “work of God” to which Paul refers is the Church, and it must take priority over any other consideration. Paul’s words to the Romans have particular application:

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: ‘The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.’ (Rom. 15:1-2)

In other words, for the sake of unity in the body of Christ, the stronger side must bear with the infirmities of the weaker.

Ultimately, both sides may need to leave these divisive matters to God for Him to straighten out and, in the meantime, choose to “stop passing judgment on one another” (Rom. 14:13). Bishop Charles Mason chose this route when seeking the baptism in the Holy Spirit. The founder of COGIC was so deeply troubled by the injustices perpetrated on his people that he was stymied in his efforts to receive from God:

That night the Lord spoke to me that Jesus saw all of this world’s wrongs but did not attempt to set it right until God overshadowed Him with the Holy Ghost. And He said that “I was no better than my Lord,” and if I wanted Him to baptize me, I would have to let the people’s rights and wrongs all alone and look to Him. And I said yes to God.²⁸

The Church’s Finest Hour

entecostals already hold the key to their own unity. They have received the Holy Spirit in His fullness and He is the Spirit of Unity—the common “blood” that flows in the veins of every true Pentecostal. “God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Rom. 5:5). If Pentecostals stay full of the Holy Spirit, they will stay full of love for one another. Paraphrasing a well-known verse, “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of [differences]” (1 Pet. 4:8). Love will bridge the racial divide in Pentecostalism. The “climactic moment” of the Memphis reconciliation conference occurred when Bishop Blake, with tears in his eyes, entreated the delegates: “Brothers and sisters, I commit my love to you. There are problems down the road, but a strong commitment to love will overcome them.”²⁹ This outpouring of love by an African-American Pentecostal was followed by the powerful move of the Holy Spirit that became known as the “Memphis Miracle.”

The beautiful harmony among the races at Azusa Street can happen again on a wider scale. Modern Pentecostals have advantages those early pioneers did not have. The advancements brought on by the Civil Rights movement have changed the nature of race relations in America removing the social stigma from interracial activity. Standing on this platform, Pentecostals can

set the example for society at large by demonstrating fervent love in the midst of racial and political diversity. Pentecostalism can be God's shining "city on a hill"—a beacon of hope to all around.

[T]he Azusa Street Mission provides a glimpse of what is possible if we allow space for the Holy Spirit to change hearts and minds. It may also provide a model for congregations in our own day to embrace this same kind of diversity, to demonstrate before the world the power of the gospel to break down the artificial racial and ethnic walls that otherwise divide us.³⁰

This mirrors Jesus' prayer for His divided Church: "I pray ... that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am

in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:20-21).

If Pentecostals would commit themselves to be the answer to our Lord's prayer, America could be spared the racial turmoil some people are predicting. The story of the late G. T. Haywood, the black Pentecostal pastor of a large interracial church in Indianapolis, demonstrates that such a thing is possible. Haywood reached across the racial divide of his day and earned the respect of both blacks and whites. Thirty years after his death, when the nation was engulfed in racial turmoil and violence, Indianapolis was spared much of that, and civic leaders attributed this to the legacy of Haywood.³¹ If that legacy were repeated on a wide scale, the new century could be the Church's finest hour.

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⁷Robeck, *Azusa Street Mission and Revival*, 56.

⁸*Ibid.*, 81.

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¹²Blumhofer, 3.

¹³Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., “Azusa Street Revival,” in *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, rev. ed., ed. Stanley M. Burgess (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 349.

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¹⁹Cox, 312.

²⁰Gastón Espinosa, “Righteousness and Justice: Barack Obama, Pentecostals, and the 2008 Election” (a paper presented at the 39th Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, North Central University, Minneapolis, MN, March 6, 2010), 3. Espinosa states that Pentecostals and Evangelicals are the largest religious block in the nation, representing 26 percent of the electorate. Obama needed to garner only one-fourth of that block to be guaranteed the presidency.

²¹Ibid., 12

²²Cox, 297.

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²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Hunter, “Reconciliation, 3.

²⁷All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version.

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²⁹Synan, “Memphis 1994: 16

³⁰Robeck, *Azusa Street Mission and Revival*, 14.

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