

The Past: Historical Roots Of Racial Unity And Division In American Pentecostalism - Response to A Paper Presented by Dr. Cecil M. Robeck, Jr.

By Dr. Oliver J. Haney, Jr.

The author has provided the readers with a scholarly history of the subject of racial disunity in the Holiness-Pentecostal Movement since the Azusa Street Revival of 1906-1909. It is a well written statement of the facts surrounding the problems which are responsible for much of the racial separation between white and black Holiness-Pentecostal churches today.

The material is well documented and presented in an easy-reading style, which enables the reader to follow with clarity the pattern of thought projected by the author. Though the paper has some major strengths, it is not without weaknesses. Both the strengths and weaknesses will be addressed in this response.

To begin with, in reading the Introduction, the serious reader immediately raises questions both about the sincerity of the author and the "truthfulness" of the remainder of the paper. Consider, for example, a direct quote from a paragraph beginning at the bottom of page 3:

It is my intent to build up the Church rather than merely discredit it. We are not really helped if we attempt to assess our predecessor by today's standards. Nor are we fair to assign their motives which we believe they had without clear evidence from their own pens or mouths. They need to be viewed as people of their time in order for us to understand what it was that led them to take the positions which they took. They need to be judged objectively on the basis of how they lived up to the standards which they claimed for themselves.

This statement appears to leave room to justify the white Holiness-Pentecostal churches for their blatant racist attitudes and ministries through which they deliberately and with full knowledge of scriptural truths chose to be guided by the cultural mores of their times, rather than by the WORD OF GOD. More could be said about this, but due to space constraints, I will raise it later during our discussion period.

Definitions in the paper are helpful. They give clarity and guidance, which also add to the quality of the writing. Following the definitions, the paper takes a cautious turn to the right.

In defining the truths of the Azusa Street Revival, the author clearly articulates the history in graphic and appealing terms. Much of what is said is material never

before known by most Pentecostals. These facts will serve as eye-openers to all Pentecostals. They lift Bishop W. J. Seymour to a new level of prominence in the history of the movement. They also truthfully identify the role of the Reverend Charles Fox Parham, also considered one of the fathers of the movement. More importantly, however, they tell of the beginning of racial indifference within the movement which seems to have been caused in part by the white Pentecostals inability to resist pressures from the Los Angeles press and to accept blacks as equal saints who had received the same Holy Ghost experience. This separation lasted well beyond Azusa Street, indicating that Frank Bartleman's historic statement "the colorline was washed away in the blood" (quoted on page 17) was and is not reality. This fact is also clearly evident in the remainder of the paper.

Dr. Robeck's summary of actions by the Assemblies of God is both informative and interesting: informative in that it catalogues a history of the church's "struggle" with the problem of race. At the same time, it is interesting and baffling to see that none of her attempts to deal with racism were ever guided by Scripture, rather the racial attitudes of her followers. Thus, they all ended almost where they started, namely decisions to allow race to supersede the Word of God. This appears to be where we are in the struggle today. Perhaps we could learn from their futility.

The history of the Assemblies of God, as well as those of most "white Holiness-Pentecostal churches," clearly demonstrates that they deliberately chose to be guided by the culture, including the racist Jim Crow laws of their time, rather than by the truth of the Word of God. These facts clearly can be seen in the white Pentecostal response, or non-response, to the racial climates of the last twenty years, which is equally as strong as it was in the early teens of this century.

One could easily raise the question of the white Holiness-Pentecostal church's response to the Civil Rights Movement of the sixties. We could ask for some justification of their silence to the cries and struggles of their black sisters and brothers. Or maybe, we should ask whether or not white so-called Spirit-filled saints actually accepted black so-called Spirit-filled saints as their sisters and brothers in Jesus, the Christ. If not, then their silence or criticism of the Civil Rights Movement could be justified. But if they espouse positions to the contrary, then they must be called upon to justify their silence, condemnation, and non-involvement.

Perhaps the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., still challenges us today. On a trip to Mississippi, Dr. King saw some white churches and asked, "Whose churches are these, who worships here, and who is their God?" As we gather today, could we not ask the same questions?

While the paper has some glaring shortcomings, it serves as a catalyst for sincere thought which can lead to redemption for all of us. As mentioned earlier, the summary perhaps is the strongest part of the paper. Here Robeck gives us some biblical guidelines as to how we can overcome the sinful blight and dark night of our

past. He also identifies some role models for us both in individuals (Bishop Charles H. Mason, Bishop W. J. Seymour, and A. J. Tomlinson) and churches (Church of God of Prophecy and the Apostolic Faith Church of God). These examples have met this formidable foe and have allowed God to perform a major spiritual transformation, thus moving forward together as one body in Jesus, the Christ. Through such, they at least made progress.

But today, our times and the Word of God demand much more. Just "progress" is not sufficient. We must work together to conquer this sinful foe once and for all.

Finally, because of the quality of the paper and the desperate need for much scholarly work on our history, I have selected this paper as required reading in the Course History and Polity of the Church of God in Christ at the C. H. Mason Seminary. I also highly recommend it to all who are sincerely interested in the history of the Holiness-Pentecostal Movement.

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