

The Future: A Strategy for Reconciliation - Response to A Paper Presented by Dr. Vinson Synan

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In his paper focusing on a future strategy for racial reconciliation within Pentecostalism, Dr. Vinson Synan presents a number of issues which merit the serious reflection of all who long for the eradication of the shameful racist blot which continues to stain the social soul of American Pentecostalism. I would like to begin my review of Synan's paper by underscoring those insights which he has correctly and justifiably advanced.

First, Dr. Synan is squarely on target when he observes that any meaningful efforts at overcoming the legacy of racial estrangement must be preceded by an acknowledgement of past failures. This simple assertion calls for the outworking of a core scriptural principle--that confession is preliminary to forgiveness (1 John 1:8-9). Yet many of the perpetrators and beneficiaries of racism are unwilling to acknowledge any collective culpability for the injustices that resulted from a system of racial oppression and subjugation.

Second, there needs to be an acknowledgement that many of the white Pentecostal pioneers failed to exercise prophetic leadership by not capitalizing on the opportunity for sustained racial reconciliation which was inherent in the Azusa Street revival. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Pentecostal Movement was clearly possessed of the potential for dismantling the system of American apartheid.

Third, most white Pentecostal historians and apologists have heretofore overlooked (perhaps even purposely disregarded) the pivotal contributions of African Americans to the development of the modern Pentecostal Movement. Just recently I was listening to an audiotape of one of the most celebrated pastors in Pentecostal history, who in the late 1930s was sponsoring an Azusa rally at her church. In a reference to the Azusa Revival, which she said had occurred thirty-three years earlier, she mentioned that "White" and "Colored" brethren had gathered there. No mention was made of the catalytic role of W. J. Seymour. In fact, only in recent years have his enormous contributions been recognized. In previous years, Charles Parham was credited with being Pentecostalism's theological architect (which was probably true) as well as the Movement's leading catalyst (which was false).

Fourth, all Pentecostals must be brought together in the unity of the Spirit. This points to the truth that it is only through the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit--as opposed to purely organizational or humanistic strategies--that individuals of vastly different ethnic, racial, socio-economic, theological and historical backgrounds can be brought into one Lord, one faith, and one baptism.

Fifth, in order for Pentecostals to move meaningfully toward the goal of unity which our Lord envisioned/commanded for the members of His Body, and which characterized those first Pentecostals in the Upper Room (Acts 2:1-4), there needs to be the convening of regular ecumenical, interdenominational, and cross-cultural gatherings that embrace Pentecostals of diverse streams, including Charismatics (the neo-Pentecostals).

Sixth, there needs to be the establishment of collaborative ministry endeavors that capitalize on the peculiar strengths and effectiveness of black Pentecostals. This is especially true in the area of Third World foreign missions, where Blacks probably have more credibility than white Pentecostals in that they are not looked upon as the agents of colonial domination or cultural hegemony.

Finally, we need to exploit the power of Pentecostal music to serve as an important bridge between diverse Pentecostals. Pentecostal music is by its nature race transcendent. It has the capacity to usher the faithful into a realm of religious consciousness that renders irrelevant many of the barriers and trivialities of life.

I would now like to point to some areas where perhaps I would go significantly beyond the observations of Synan.

While I basically agree with his suggestions of the need for the acknowledgement of past failures, I would like to underscore that there must also be the presence of an open and honest dialogue characterized by unbridled candor, possibly bordering on the brutal. Such candor would acknowledge, Professor Hollenweger notwithstanding, that responsibility for the institutionalization of racial segregation within American Pentecostalism rests entirely on the shoulders of white Pentecostals. Blacks had no choice in the matter. They were the victims of, not participants in, the dominant power structure that enshrined "jim crowism." Blacks could not force interracial fellowship or coexistence. Thus, they bowed to the dictates of American apartheid out of necessity. Any attempt to do otherwise would have resulted in their social annihilation (e.g., imprisonment, economic isolation, physical brutality, lynching).

White Pentecostals, on the other hand, missed a golden opportunity to allow the dynamic force of the Holy Spirit--which they believed could effect other wondrous and miraculous deeds--to countermand the sinful effects of an evil and unjust social order. In truth, many white Pentecostals encouraged, gladly welcomed, and even defended the culture of racial segregation with all its invidious practices. Failure to accept responsibility for such developments smacks of revisionist history. It widens and prolongs distrust and estrangement.

A future strategy must also affirm distinctives in religious culture as Blacks and Whites come together. Certain differences in styles and preferences in worship must be retained. We need not attempt to establish a unifying paradigm based on some melting pot notion. In nonessentials we can build a mosaic, affirming and

celebrating our diversity. We must seek unity, not uniformity. Hence, Whites should not disparage Black worship as being primitive, and Blacks should not dismiss White worship as being dead or dry.

The greatest concern I have about Dr. Synan's strategy for the future centers around what seems to be the disproportionate weight he gives to mass interracial worship events in overcoming historical barriers based on race and ethnicity. Admittedly, such events can be important in fostering dialogue and the establishment of substantive (versus cosmetic) fellowship. Indeed they can serve as a mobilizing catalyst. However, we must be vigilant that such gatherings are not allowed to become mere hallelujah conclaves where we meet just to engage in emotional hype without any commitment to institutional as well as personal transformation.

My own reluctance toward mass interracial events grows somewhat out of my experience of having seen and even participated in interracial services where people congregate once a year to utter pious platitudes about love, brotherhood, oneness and community, only to return to the entrenched daily patterns of residential and social apartheid. Unfortunately, our riproaring hallelujah sessions almost invariably fail to engage in substantive analyses of the social, cultural or historical dimensions of racism. Neither do they seem disturbed by our comfort with cultural homogeneity. I believe Spirit anointing should be about ethics as well as ecstasy. Christian love should be demonstrated as well as discussed. Appropriation is far more important than showcasing.

I believe that following our spiritual assemblies we have a chance to make reconciliation more concrete through collaborative ministry efforts, and these efforts must focus on domestic evangelism as well as foreign missions. To this end, all Pentecostals--Black and White--will have to develop a more enlightened and aggressive attitude toward social ministry.

Social ministry is endemic to the existence of the Black Church (including black Pentecostal Churches). Black religious activity cannot be divorced from the collective struggles or marginalization of all Black people. Of necessity, the Black Church has had to focus on the survival of its constituents as it was their only bulwark. Hence, liberation is an integral focus of the Black Church. It has neither the time nor the luxury to engage in many of the propositional crusades that claim the attention of its White counterpart. Rather, the Black Church must focus on such issues as poverty, unemployment, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, illiteracy, youth delinquency. It cannot content itself with merely ventilating outrage, letting off steam, or bashing. It must seek positive solutions to the dilemmas which its constituents confront on a daily basis.

Fortunately, social ministry actually is not foreign to the Pentecostal tradition either. Second Work Pentecostals are the theological heirs of John Wesley, who himself was actively engaged in such ministry. He once observed, "There is no holiness but social holiness. There is no Christianity but social Christianity."

Finished Work Pentecostals may be guided by the example of Aimee Semple McPherson (founder of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel), whose Angelus Temple in Los Angeles, California, was a social welfare, as well as spiritual refuge for the poor and destitute, particularly during the period of the Great Depression.

As we seek to expand Pentecostalism's umbrella, in the future we should also make overtures to the less strident and less exclusivist elements of the Oneness Pentecostal Movement. They, too--as do Charismatics--represent an important Pentecostal stream.

While certain differences are likely to persist, black and white Pentecostals should also discuss the reasons for the deep chasm that divides them politically. Although they hold identical views on issues of morality, Whites need to understand why the terms "conservative" and "political right" have scary connotations for Blacks. Most Blacks have little reason for wanting to "conserve" a system that has historically discounted or marginalized them. Moreover, the conservative movement is often led by those who have a long history of antipathy toward civil rights and social justice. Too often such persons are perceived as racists.

In summary, while we welcome periodic (even regular) gatherings to promote the racial unity we seek within Pentecostalism, we should ensure that these gatherings give primary focus to issues of real substance. After all, most of us are already shouting, dancing and even speaking in tongues--more often than not in racially homogeneous (i.e., segregated) worship settings.