

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

By Lamar Vest

There are firm assurances that the early Pentecostal Movement was infused with strong ecumenical implications of the theology of love and holiness (justice). Many of the leaders who helped form our present-day denominations evidently believed that the unity of the churches and the people of the world would be fully realized through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The roots of my own denomination (Church of God, Cleveland, Tennessee), lie in the formation of a Christian Union with an expressed purpose of bringing the people of God together in oneness of mission around Holy Scripture.

Although, to my knowledge, a full study of William J. Seymour's theology has yet to be written, Dr. Robeck points out that the Azusa Mission, both through verbal and printed proclamation, declared itself as standing for the unity of God's people everywhere. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was seen as the unifying factor, baptizing believers by one Spirit into one body. Seymour also recognized interracial inclusiveness to be a central mark of the church. For Seymour there appeared to be a definite relationship between sanctification, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and racial unity. Sanctification required racial unity because the heart of sanctification was love. Tongues and love were the evidence of the Holy Spirit baptism. Seymour seemed to understand that tongues could be falsified but that love could not be faked over a long period of time.

If, indeed, racial unity was a vital part of the foundation of the Pentecostal Movement (as I believe it was), this vision has been drastically eclipsed. That fragmentation is seen by the formation of the various denominations represented in this meeting. It is also evidenced by the fact that we are struggling to pull down some obvious barriers between members of the Lord's body—barriers along racial lines. The often-quoted words of Bartleman regarding the early Pentecostal Movement, "the color line was washed away by the blood," have certainly not stood the test of practical application.

While racism and white dominance are not exclusively Pentecostal issues, the fact that racial unity was so strongly stated by early leaders inevitably focuses more attention on our failures, as it should. Unquestionably, racism and white dominance have taken a severe toll on the original mission of the Pentecostal Movement and on its present-day credibility. Thankfully, we are now willing to take a probing and incisive look at the historical roots of this condition and, hopefully, to repent and take necessary corrective measures. The fact that we are reviewing such an intense paper as the one presented by Dr. Robeck, and, indeed, the whole idea of this special

conference, testifies to our willingness to examine our past in anticipation of positive change.

Jim Wallis reminds us, "Put simply, racism negates the reason for which Christ died—the reconciling work of the cross. It denies the purpose of the church to bring together in Christ, those who have been divided from one another." (Wallis, America's Original Sin) Tensions between the races seem to be growing. Pentecostal reconciliation must come quickly or, I believe, our lack of unity will be exposed to the world. The cry to turn back to "traditional American values," often voiced by denominations represented by PFNA and NAE, is not our primary agenda. What we really need to do is to recover the biblical values of living with integrity and maintaining relationships with all of God's people. Pentecostals must once again become a "House of Prayer" for the healing of nations, as it was intended from the beginning.

Depending upon our own denominational affiliation and our own geographical references, each of us would probably explain past racial relations differently. We would probably also have our own set of defenses to attempt justifying some past actions. However, regardless of our denominational affiliations, or our geographic locations, the issues do not change. From Dr. Robeck's paper, I have concluded that our common areas of concern must include at least the following:

1. Pentecostals have not faithfully fulfilled the original vision of racial unity.
2. Tragically, racism has not yet peaked in our society and it not only threatens what God intended for the Pentecostal Movement but for the future of America as well.
3. The definite lack of opportunity for participation of non-whites in Pentecostal and Evangelical leadership must be addressed.
4. Whites do not always recognize their own prejudices or how their actions are viewed by African-American brothers and sisters.
5. Racism goes beyond prejudice and discrimination. Racism is a power (control) issue. At its foundation, it is the belief that race accounts for differences in human character or ability and that a particular race is superior to others.
6. Treatment of African-American Pentecostals by white Pentecostals has fallen far below the level of loving relationship required by Holy Scripture.
7. What is really at stake is more than our willingness to work together. What is at stake is the very unity of the body of Christ formed by the Holy Spirit. We either reconcile or we die.
8. We must repent for our sins of prejudice, discrimination and racism before God will restore us to our original purpose.

Dr. Robeck's paper has raised for me some poignant questions for which I personally desire more information. They include:

1. When did Pentecost begin accepting individualism and privatism as opposed to being the people of God.

2. What are the influences and consequences of fundamentalism on the Pentecostal Movement?
3. How many Pentecostal blacks and whites were involved in the Civil Rights Movement and how many are personally involved in a continuing effort to bring about racial equality in our society?
4. To what extent has the Pentecostal Movement done any better, or worse, in race relations than the larger evangelical community?
5. When do we start making clear statements to the world regarding our position? What do we say and to whom do we say it?
6. What are the social movements which have grown out of the Holiness and Pentecostal Movements?
7. What happened to the founding of the Pentecostal Fellowship of North America regarding race relations? Were blacks included? If not, why not?

After reading this paper, it is more obvious to me than ever that our resistance to racial unity is often hidden. It is past time for us to lay aside the diminutive cliches which separate us and move with swiftness to a genuine restoration.

I, for one, am ready to repent and ask for forgiveness of my African-American brothers and sisters. I am also ready to repent for any racism demonstrated by my denomination. I want to see the Pentecostal Movement restored to the original vision. I want to see us form that unity that can bring about the renewal and reformation necessary for us to be the people of God on this earth.