

The Problem Of Racism In The Contemporary Pentecostal Movement - Response to A Paper Presented by Dr. Leonard Lovett

By Dr. Robert Michael Franklin

I am humbled to share this format with Dr. Leonard Lovett, a person who has been my mentor and conversation partner for over twenty years. He is the premier African American Pentecostal theologian/ethicist pastor of our time. His 1979 doctoral dissertation at Emory University displayed exemplary creativity as he explored the relationship between black Holiness-Pentecostalism and black liberation theology. It also displayed Dr. Lovett's characteristic prophetic courage as he "castigated black Pentecostals who were reluctant to embrace the theory and praxis of liberation theology." [Sanders] So, I am humbled and I am honored, and perhaps even a bit mischievously exhilarated to have this opportunity to talk back to my teacher without getting into too much trouble.

Lovett's creativity and courage are abundantly displayed through his presentation. He begins by naming the demon of racism which he helpfully defines as "prejudice linked with power (p. 3) and proceeds to affirm the value of conversation. Amidst our conversation, Lovett urges the family of Anglo and European Pentecostal Christians to repent for their past blatant and subtle acts of discrimination and assumptions of white superiority. As he puts it, "repentance is the key and only road to racial liberation and reconciliation." In his conclusion, he expands that thesis arguing that the two basic impediments to racial reconciliation are white denials of racism and black complicity with the tokenism of white institutions. Finally, he calls the churches to "remedial and distributive justice," (p. 16) an exciting notion which he fails to elucidate, and he exhorts us to permit the work of the Holy Spirit to perform its radical work "within each of us."

Lovett assumes the posture of a spiritual physician offering a diagnosis of the church's condition. He prefers to be honest rather than polite. It is a bitter pill and the question is what are we going to do with it? Swallow and be healed, or deny the diagnosis and grow more ill?

I have two principal concerns with Lovett's perspective. They have to do with the fundamental assumptions underlying his diagnosis and analysis and with the limited prescription he offers. First, he seems to assume that nearly all white Pentecostals are in the same condition of unrepentant racism. Is this true? If so, what does this say implicitly about the power of the Holy Spirit to reveal, convict, and transform believers who are struggling with secret sins in their lives.

I do not believe it to be the case. There are Christians who happen to be white and Pentecostal who have been radically transformed in their perspectives on race.

Some of them are here now and perhaps can offer testimony of how God has worked in their lives. As a Christian who happens to be African American, I would like to hear such testimonies from my white sisters and brothers. In my moments of despair regarding the color line, it would help enormously to recall the words of reforming racists. From personal experience, I know that such reforming folk are out there because I have listened to their testimonies in the privacy of my office. They are the ones who seek me out at the end of worship services where I am the guest preacher. They need to be less timid about declaring the magnificent and ongoing work of a justice-seeking God.

The point is that there are white Christians who have already embraced the message of repentance and are now ready for the next step. According to womanist (African American women) theologians and ethnicists, the next step must include concrete acts of renunciation: renunciation of the privileges which the systems of this culture distribute to whites and males; renunciation of the ideology of white supremacy; and, commitment to empowering people who have been deprived of opportunities, privileges and power in the past. Under this analysis, it is impossible to be a committed Christian, a reforming racist, in this culture unless you can point to concrete ways in which you have helped to empower disfranchised people of color. But, it is important to note that whites cannot overcome their racism without some conversation and reality testing from people of color. As African American Christians who desire the ultimate reconciliation of Christ's church, we have a responsibility to be in partnership with honest, committed, white colleagues. For this reason, this conference is exceedingly important and hopeful.

This leads to a related point regarding Lovett's assumptions, namely, that he comes very close to letting black Christians off the hook with regard to our respective ethical obligations to eradicate racism. We cannot be sanguine about the fact that the most ardent and widely listened to voice of unchurched black Americans is probably Minister Louis Farrakhan. Farrakhan is a separatist who has no commitment to racial reconciliation. He is a persuasive speaker who evokes and manipulates black rage with ambiguous intent and consequences. I believe that tens of thousands of African Americans turn out to hear him, in part, because they are hurting and angry, and they crave the therapy of having those powerful emotions ventilated with style, bombast, and defiance.

Among black folk who attend church, most are members of the 70,000 black congregations which are part of the family of historically black churches. For the most part, these churches represent a form of hope and empowerment for the black community. But, speaking frankly, few of these congregations are engaged aggressively with white churches in the explicit work of racial reconciliation. Clearly, they have other concerns and crises to which they must respond. But, why is this item not more central than it is? Is it due, largely, to the disinterest in racial collaboration of black clergy and theologians? If so, does this state of affairs increase disproportionately Farrakhan and other separatists' influence on black

public opinion? Is Lovett letting the black church off the hook in the work of racial reconciliation?

My second concern pertains to the thin prescription Lovett provides. Back to the first concern: if we were to assume for a moment that there are black and white Christians who are ready, willing, and able to move beyond initial expressions of repentance towards renunciation and beyond, what practical steps might that process include? In addition to challenging the churches to do the right thing, we can perform ministries of grace and empowerment by providing moral action plans for motivated people. I will conclude these remarks with one such plan which I have been developing and refining. It will appear in an expanded form in my upcoming book, *Another Day's Journey*.

I refer to this as a practical theology of racial reconciliation which includes a program of social therapeutics which can be adapted to particular circumstances. Ideally, this program would be embraced by two or more congregations of differing ethnic identity. Groups of twenty or thirty people might be brought together once a week for a month during the Lenten season, for instance.

First, the reconciling work of God's people must begin in worship celebrating the covenant God has made with God's creation to lovingly redeem us from sin and heal our brokenness. We must acknowledge that we are equal sinners before a reconciling God who is impatient with our sin and conformity to the ways of the world. Second, the people move from worship into mixed small groups where they can tell their personal stories concerning their first discoveries of racial difference. This is the process of conversation. Third, as people exchange stories, some will be compelled to confess their past and present sins or practicing racism and stereotyping. So goes the process of confession. Fourth, the people move from talk to action as they identify a project on which they all can work together. This is cooperation. This might involved adopting an inner city school which desperately needs angels who can provide some of the resources not provided by depleted public revenue. Fifth, people return to discussion following their work together. There they engage in the delicate process of criticism where friends point out continuing areas of growth for one another. When criticism occurs later in the process rather than early, often people trust one another enough to facilitate change. When conversations begin with criticism and accusations of racism, sexism, and ill will, they rarely lead to anything transformative for anyone. Finally, the process returns to worship, where the work of the people is celebrated.

I offer this model as one direction, an additional dose of medicine, which may be of use in some communities. Thanks to Dr. Lovett for the thoughtful and provocative manner in which he has initiated our discussion.