

The Future: A Strategy For Reconciliation

By Vinson Synan

Scripture: Acts 2:6 “and when this sound was heard the multitude came together.”

The Holy Spirit is the “Spirit of Truth” and the “Spirit of Unity.” (By one Spirit we are baptized into “one body.”) The unity of the upper room, “one accord,” brought down the Spirit on the church which was born on Pentecost. On the Day of Pentecost all races, cultures, and nationalities came together in the streets. The miraculous power of Pentecost was greater than their differences.

Signs, wonders, and charismatic gifts such as miracles, tongues, and healing still point nonbelievers to Jesus. At Azusa Street, the “multitude came together” for the same reason as in Acts 2:6. God had chosen the Disciples, who were “nobodies” of the world, to confound the wise. Pentecost still has a unitive and spectacular effect when the Lord moves in power among us. God sees us today from heaven, and we know that He is well pleased with what He sees.

I offer three lines of thought for us as we leave Memphis today as a newly-united body of believers, Pentecostal Partners in winning the World for Jesus.

1. A Strategy for the past
2. A Strategy for the Present
3. A Strategy for the future

I. A STRATEGY FOR THE PAST

Those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Let us here today acknowledge our successes and failures as Pentecostal believers.

Our Successes

Despite desperate opposition, we have become the second largest family of Christians in the world in only 93 years; from one person on January 1, 1901, to over 200,000,000 in 1994. We have organized over one million churches worldwide. One out of every four full-time Christian workers is a Pentecostal. About 80% of new converts from paganism are won by persons from Pentecostal or Charismatic ministries. We are culturally one of the most diverse families of Christians on earth. We are also the fastest growing family of Christians worldwide. We must not be triumphalists, but we should humbly thank God for this record. To Him alone is the glory.

Our Inter-racial Origins

The interracial origins of our movement is surely one of the greatest miracles in

our history. In the most racist period of American history, the first Pentecostals led the world in interracial worship, especially at Azusa Street under Seymour and with the Church of God in Christ under C. H. Mason. In the early days, Blacks brought Pentecost to Whites and Whites brought the pentecostal experience to Blacks. The reason I am here today is because black hands were laid on white heads in prayer for the baptism in the Holy Spirit.

My own denomination, the Pentecostal Holiness Church, was pentecostalized after Gaston Barnabas Cashwell journeyed to Los Angeles from Dunn, North Carolina, overcame his racial prejudice, and spoke in tongues. The first man to bring the pentecostal message from Azusa Street to the Church of God in Christ was a white man, Glen Cook. The man who brought Pentecost to South Africa was a white man, John G. Lake, who founded not only the Apostolic Faith Mission (which gave us David du Plessis), but also the Christian Zion Church which now claims over 6,000,000 members, the largest church in the nation. These stories could be repeated by the hundreds. Surely Pentecost was indeed color blind in its beginnings.

Our Contribution to the Church of the Twentieth Century

The restoration of the gifts of the Spirit to the church has probably been our greatest contribution to the contemporary church. Our expressive worship and praise and freedom of worship has deep roots in the black church and experience in America. I shall never forget my teenage years right here in Memphis where almost every Sunday night young people from many churches came to the East Trigg Baptist church for the eleven o'clock broadcast. Here we heard stirring sermons by Pastor W. Herbert Brewster, as well as music rendered by the Brewsteraires, the Brewsterenes, and the Brewsterettes, who sang the great gospel songs and Negro spirituals. The entire middle section was reserved for whites. Here we heard the renowned Queen C. Anderson sing, "These are They Who Have Come Up Out of Great Tribulation." The shouting and dancing in the Spirit made us feel right at home.

The first bridge between black and white Christians was through music and much of it organized here in Memphis. The only time I saw Charles Harrison Mason in person was at the 1953 General Conference of the Pentecostal Holiness Church which convened here in Memphis. He attended on the night Oral Roberts preached. But at that time we were generally unaware of Mason, Mason Temple and the great work of God among African-Americans right here in the city where he lived.

Our Failures

Part of our strategy of the past will involve admitting our mistakes, shortcomings, and failures as a movement. God called us to be giants, but often we have been dwarfs.

Failed Leaders

I have often said that the Pentecostal Movement must be of God, or else our very leaders would have destroyed the movement long ago. One thing about Pentecostals, they both succeed and fail spectacularly. As far as I know, however, there never was the slightest question about the absolute spirituality, holiness and integrity of Seymour and Mason, as well as many other early leaders.

Failed Race Relations

But we have failed at several points in our history, and none sadder than our record on race relations. For about 20 years, Pentecostals led the way in interracial relations. But by 1924 this period ended. What began as a prophetic work of the Holy Spirit challenging the racial status quo, ended in an accommodation to the Jim Crow segregation of the times. Dr. Walter Hollenweger, who strongly advocates the view that pentecostalism began among American Blacks, declined to place a heavy burden on the White Pentecostals for the racial separations that followed Azusa Street. He said in "Black Pentecostal Concepts..." that a primary reason for segregating the races was:

“...very heavy criticism of the traditional white denominations against the Pentecostals who disqualified Pentecostalism by pointing to its humble Black beginnings. It would be unfair—in my opinion—to put the blame for this development wholly on the White Pentecostals. They just adapted themselves to what was considered decent American Protestantism...”
(Geneva: World Council of Churches, June 1970, p. 17)

According to the record, both Blacks and Whites accepted the situation as the way things were done in America. That was then, but we are now living in 1994. Looking back, we can now see that we Pentecostals should have never bowed to the prejudices and pressures of the times. And we should recognize that the problem was not only a pentecostal one, it was a kingdom problem that affected the entire body of Christ.

Another failure has been for Whites to overlook the contributions of Africa-Americans in the development of pentecostalism in America and the world. As I have looked at the records of the early Pentecostals in many nations, I have seen a clear acknowledgment of the Los Angeles roots of the movement. Although I still believe that “interracial” is the best word to describe the origins of the movement in America, I believe that there has been an unintended tendency to overlook the crucial role played by Blacks by historians and apologists of the Movement. It is time to admit that this is a serious mistake that needs to be rectified in the future. We should today recognize the significant work of such men as Ithiel Clemmons, Leonard Lovett, Carlton Pearson and James Tinney, and his unique journal, Spirit. We should also appreciate the contributions of such white leaders as John Meares and his Bridgebuilders magazine, as well as the research and work of Douglas

Nelson, whose work on William J. Seymour has greatly expanded our understanding of the Azusa Apostle.

Probably the most difficult failure to admit is that over the years some Pentecostals have been outright racists and have deeply harmed the cause of Christ and of pentecostalism through this glaring blind spot. I grew up in the old South and have personal knowledge of the awful racist attitudes of many pentecostal pastors, evangelists, and even bishops. It is now high time to pray for healing and reconciliation for the terrible sins of the past.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of our separation has been the decades of non-communication. We all know that in a marriage, if a husband and wife do not speak to each other for even one day, something is wrong. To go two or three days is unbearable. Think of it, for some 80 years, Blacks and Whites have hardly spoken to each other. It is time for that to end. From now on, let us communicate, pray, and praise God together.

We need a strategy for the past that recognizes our failures and successes, but that puts them behind us so that we can go forward together. Let us overcome the past together in the spirit of Ephesians 2:11: "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one, and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility." Jesus, who is our peace, can and does make us one.

II. **A Strategy for the Present.**

The most important matter before us today, however, is not the past. It is now - today. The Lord has given us a second chance. We must seize the moment, a "kairos" time and opportunity for us all. Let us start with the organization that will be launched here in Memphis. Let us support it with all our might against all critics and detractors. Let us all resolve to attend the annual meetings unless we are providentially hindered. Let us put the dates on our schedules as a sacred call of God to become one "as Jesus and the Father are one".

We should go from Memphis and shout it from the housetops. Let us tell it in our annual convocations and assemblies. Let us tell it in our local churches. Let us tell it to our Christian friends in other non-pentecostal denominations. Let us write about it, preach about it, sing about it, dance about it, and rejoice over it. The "miracle of Memphis" should become front page news immediately in a nation that needs and deserves good news. Let us expect a great revival to break out immediately as the Lord blesses our efforts at unity and reconciliation. I remind you that every great revival in this century has brought down racial and denominational walls. Of course, Azusa Street was the first, but remember that the great healing crusades of the late 1940s and 1950s came as Blacks and Whites came together. Leaders in this effort were Oral Roberts and others, who, like Billy Graham, refused to continue segregated seating in their crusades. As racial barriers fell, the Spirit fell and millions were swept into the Kingdom. Although the

charismatic renewal movement in the mainline churches failed to bring large numbers of Blacks and Whites together, there are signs that great things are happening now, not only in the mainline African-American churches such as National Baptists, the AME, CME, and AME Zion churches, but in the burgeoning independent charismatic congregations that are exploding across America. Since most of these congregations are color blind, I would venture to say that they are the most racially integrated congregations in America.

It could be that in the years remaining in this millennium, one of the greatest revivals in history will take place just before the coming of the Lord. Together, we may be able to make the last great missionary effort at winning the world for Christ before the turn of the new century.

III. A Strategy for the Future

For the longer-term future, we should make every effort to bring the unity which we have achieved to the grassroots level in every city and locality in America. It would be tragic if all that results from these efforts at reconciliation remained only among the leaders of the churches in an annual convention. Although the relationships that are formed and nourished at such meetings are invaluable, we must not rest until all Pentecostals from the largest city churches to the smallest rural churches are aware of the unity that the Lord has given us. The following are some suggestions that could impact our people and the nation in a major way.

Organizing Local PCNA Chapters

The PCNA Constitution has made provisions for local chapters to be formed in major localities. It would be wonderful if most of the cities in America had vital, functioning chapters that could spread the spirit of "Pentecostal Partners" (Memphis '94) to the nation. This would take a great deal of effort and initiative on the part of the national local leadership, but it could be done. Some coordination would be necessary from a central data base of the cooperating churches. Perhaps a meeting of the Executive Committee in the near future could begin the process of identifying leaders who could set up model chapters. The cities where much work has already been done, Atlanta and Memphis, could provide the inspiration for other chapters.

Sponsoring Citywide Pentecostal Celebrations.

In the last 13 years, there has been a growing recognition that the Pentecost season is a marvelous opportunity for an effective annual witness in local cities across the land. Traditionally, Pentecost ranks just behind Christmas and Easter as major Christian feast days. It is already prominent in the calendars of the liturgical churches. Many churches celebrate Pentecost as the birthday of the church. It is one day that all Christians have in common. On that day, Christians go back in Spirit to the upper room. This is the historic point of departure for the whole

church. It is a natural day for us as Pentecostals to come together and make a common witness to our faith. On this day, one cannot escape referring to the power of the Holy Spirit, of the tongues of fire, of speaking in tongues, and of preaching with such power that 3,000 people were saved.

In Oklahoma City, we have celebrated Pentecost since 1978 with ecumenical services in major local churches with attendance ranging from 1,000 to 5,000. We always have three speakers; one Pentecostal, one mainline Protestant, and one Catholic Charismatic. The main speaker rotates between the streams from year to year. We have had such main speakers as David duPlessis, Dennis Bennett, Cardinal Suenens, and Lloyd Ogivilie, to name a few. Many have been blessed each year. We would be happy to share our experience with others who would like to do the same.

This year the American Baptist Convention began a nationwide program to celebrate Pentecost. Out of 5,800 ABC churches, 1,300 participated this year. They have produced an excellent resource booklet titled, Let's celebrate Pentecost, by Emmett Johnson. I recommend that local chapters obtain a copy for future planning. (Copies can be ordered from: Renewed For Mission, American Baptist Churches, P. O. Box 851, Valley Forge, PA 19482-0851; Phone 1-610-768-2279. Cost: \$4.00 post paid.)

Sponsoring City - Wide Evangelistic Crusades

One place where Pentecostals excel is the preaching of the gospel with signs and wonders following. We have some of the greatest preachers and evangelists in the world. Some of the most powerful preachers of this generation are African-American crusades have been extremely successful in the past despite the excesses of some evangelists. If we could pack the largest auditorium in America with happy Spirit-filled people, it would make a mighty impression on the nation.

Using Mass Media

In recent years, Pentecostals have dominated Christian television, for better or worse. Yet this continues to be a major and effective opportunity for a common witness to the church and to the world. With united local chapters representing large numbers of churches, the opportunities would be unlimited for sending out the pentecostal message to the public at large.

Reaching Out to Charismatics

Since 1960 we have seen our movement extended to the ends of the earth and also to the churches in christendom. Because most Charismatics believe essentially as we do regarding the baptism in the Holy Spirit, we should fellowship and cooperate with them as fellow Pentecostals. This is especially true in the light of

the massive growth of the independent charismatic congregations in the U. S. in recent years.

We need to reach out to our Roman Catholic charismatic brothers and sisters who have carried the cause of Pentecost into areas that we could not have dreamed of a few years ago. The horrible trends in society which threaten to destroy our Christian heritage leaves us with no other choice. Since we share the same foxhole in the struggle for righteousness, let us raise up a common witness to the power of the gospel to change lives, nations, and the world.

Confronting The Powers of Evil Together

One of our lesser known strengths is the fact that we Pentecostals are heirs to a great and authentic tradition of Spirit-filled social reform that has made major advances in the struggle for justice and righteousness in this present world. This tradition ranges from John Wesley's struggle against slavery, to the abolitionist movements before the Civil War, to the work of the Salvation Army in our day. Although we owe much to our Methodist and Holiness forebears, Pentecostals have contributed much through such ministries as David Wilkerson's Teen Challenge and such ministries as CBN's Operation Blessing.

By not supporting the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, many Pentecostals missed a golden opportunity to contribute our gifts to solving the nation's vexing problem of racial discrimination. As sad as that may be, there is nothing we can do to change the past. We must now look resolutely toward the future. There is much yet to be done because Satan, as we know, will increasingly attempt to destroy all he can before the return of the Lord. To use the words of Walter Wink, we must now join forces to confront, engage, resist and defeat the enemy. But we do not struggle alone for "Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world" (I John 4:4).

In fact, the great news of the 1990s is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the black churches, beyond the traditional pentecostal bodies. This new wave of revival is now sweeping through the mainline historic black denominations including the National Baptists, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AME, Zion) churches. One of the leaders in this new wave is Paul Morton, founder of the Full Gospel Baptist movement. His roots in the Church of God in Christ have prepared him to lead a new and powerful move of the Holy Spirit in his denomination.

In the matters of social justice and civic equality, we must not sit back and let the secular world take the lead. We must create the Spirit-filled agenda of bringing Kingdom blessing and justice to our world. The baptism in the Holy Spirit can still do more to stop crime and disorder than any social programs that man can devise.

Joining Together to Evangelize the World

Although most of our churches have thriving world missions programs, we must cooperate to a greater degree in getting the gospel to the world. It would not be unthinkable for predominantly white churches to sponsor crusade featuring African-American evangelists in black nations. Of course, we may have to swallow some denomination pride to do this, but we should prayerfully consider what must be done to win the world before Jesus returns.

The same principle would apply to the American scene. Many Anglo churches could do much more in supporting churches and ministries in the inner cities. If we could join together, we could do much more in bringing the greatest gospel not only to the black and Hispanic people of America, but also to the hundreds of other ethnic minorities which are filling up our inner cities.

Again, we must overcome denominational and ethnic considerations in order to do this. If we do not, our cities may (1) burn, or, (2) be converted to the cults or to Islam. The hour is late in America. Perhaps God has brought us together here in Memphis to complete what He started in Azusa Street—to save the cities of our nation through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In 1963, the Church of God in Christ magazine International Outlook editorialized that the “Pentecostal problem” is the “cleavage of the races” which must be solved before the Movement can “shake the world.” Now that we have taken this major step to reconcile the races, let us now go forth to “shake the world” as never before.

Celebrating The Centennial of World Pentecostalism - 2001

A tremendous and historic opportunity awaits us all in 2001 when we celebrate the first outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Topeka, Kansas, in January of 1901. All the Pentecostals of the world are being invited to come to America for this grand occasion. Steps are already being taken to reserve the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California, for this event. Over 100,000 persons probably will attend the climatic meeting of the conference. The Pentecostal World Conference (PWC) has already accepted the invitation of the American Pentecostals to host the event.

What an opportunity for us as American Pentecostals to demonstrate our unity to the world. It is wonderful indeed that this racial reconciliation meeting in Memphis is taking place in time for us to plan this great celebration together. According to David Barrett, there will be over half a billion Pentecostals and Charismatics in the world by AD 2000. Already the PWC has authorized the Americans to invite the “children” of the Pentecostal Movement to join with us in Los Angeles. This means that mainline Protestant Charismatics and Catholic and Orthodox Charismatics will be invited.

This is also an opportunity for us as Americans to share with the world! The Pentecostal Movement is by far the largest and most important religious movement to originate in the United States. How wonderful that by 2001, we can join together again, Blacks and Whites, to celebrate what the Lord began a century before in Topeka and Los Angeles. We can then truly be "Pentecostal Partners."

From Memphis in October, let the word go out to the world, the Holy Ghost has brought us together again! Let the sound be heard so that the multitudes can come together and see the miracle of the first Pentecost recreated in this cynical and jaded generation.

Ken Burns in his acclaimed series, "The Civil War," showed movie clips of the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg in 1938 where 2500 veterans from the North and South recreated Pickett's charge. Immediately after the charge, the aged veterans broke rank and rushed into each other's arms to embrace. It was all over, the past was dead, love took control. Today, let us do the same. Let the dead bury the dead! Let us again pick up the same banner, fight under the same flag, and win the world for Christ.