

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

By Rev. Thomas Trask

Dr. Lovett has appealed to the white church to repent of its racism. To the extent that I can represent others before the throne of God and before you, I freely do so.

The occasion of repentance always brings gladness for it permits us to shed sin openly and walk with freedom in the cleansing Jesus brings.

Years ago, the Scottish playwright James Barrie eloquently described the gap between most person's ideals and practice:

The life of every man is a diary in which he means to write one story, and instead writes another. And his saddest hour is when he compares the volume as it is with what he vowed to make it.

I have researched the history of the church I represent, the Assemblies of God. While we have much in our past for which to praise the Lord, we recognize that the enemy sowed weeds among us. Our record of race relations indicates that we failed to keep the dream and example of an integrated Christian community, composed of all races, as modeled at Azusa Street.

But the gospel does bring liberation. We are doing our best now to walk humbly with God, remain sensitive to the Holy Spirit, repent of our past wrongs, and become the redemptive community desired by the Lord.

Please fault our history on race relations where we have erred. But please also help us with a new vision of what the church can be. Help us with your counsel, correction, and prayers of intercession. And, when we have finished looking at the past, please encourage us with the vision we have of the future; for we, too, have a dream.

The dream for the Assemblies of God is reflected in the model not only of Azusa Street, but also of the church at Philippi, the first church founded on the European continent. Look with me at three charter members: Lydia, the delivered slave girl, and the jailer.

Lydia, an Asiatic, was from Thyatira. She was wealthy. We know that because she had a home large enough to host the apostolic team of four persons. And, she was a seller of purple, the dress of the rich, the designer clothes of the era. Were she alive

today, her job, no doubt, would have been equivalent to the regional manager for a chain like Saks Fifth Avenue or Macy's.

The second convert (and we assume she was converted since she was delivered), the slave girl, had no life of her own. She had neither the status of an employee, nor the prospect of a minimum wage, for she was owned. We do not know her nationality; but many have assumed she was Greek, since that is where we find her. Uneducated, powerless, dispossessed, and a victim--that is her condition. This world is filled with persons like her, and the church is called upon to be so in touch with the Holy Spirit that the delivering power of Jesus may set them free from the demons that are destroying them.

The jailer, the third convert, was from the western culture and middle class. I think we can assume that, since he worked for the government. The pay for civil service is neither too little nor too much, but it is regular. Unlike the Asiatic Lydia, or the probable Greek slave girl, the jailer is from a different gender and ethnicity: male and Roman.

Can you imagine what these three individuals would do on Saturday night, prior to their conversions, if they had lived in our culture? (Culture does divide) Lydia probably would be at the opera listening to Pavarotti. The slave girl, no doubt, would be at the amphitheater for a concert by Madonna. And the Roman jailer would be roaring at his ring-side seat watching Hulk Hogan and wrestlemania.

These three persons simply had nothing in common: not gender, not race, not social status, not education, not ethnicity--until they met Jesus Christ (or, shall we say, until Jesus Christ met them)! And, they all settled down in the same church--notwithstanding the so-called modern homogeneous unit, birds-of-a-feather-flock-together church growth principles. Their unity, like that found at Azusa Street, was a model to the nonbelieving community of how Christ unites believers. In society, no other organization would have brought them together: not Rotary nor Kiwanis; not the garden club nor a political party. But they were united by the church of the Lord Jesus Christ in which "there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, for [we] are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

As I travel our movement from coast to coast, from north to south, I am heartened by the color transformation taking place in our local churches. Increasingly, I am seeing our churches melding into a multi-ethnic community of Christ. Our church is taking on the color of America as strong ministries flourish among Hispanics, Blacks, Asians, and a host of other minorities within our culture.

In the Assemblies of God, we are giving high priority to returning to the urban communities of our nation which, to our shame, we often abandoned in earlier days. We are grateful for how our brothers and sisters in these communities are forgiving us for our flight and welcoming us with open arms. We are here at this historic

conference to break bread with brothers and sisters and to ask the Lord to heal our own sins, close our divisions, and help us to be a true family in Christ.

We desire the multi-racial model of Azusa Street, not so we can be an anomaly of modern Pentecostal history, but so we can become the prototype for what the Holy Spirit expects of the church in the years ahead. We believe the Holy Spirit intentionally gave us Azusa Street as a beacon of what we might become. We cannot undo the history of racism that followed the Azusa Street revival, but we can, with the Lord's help, write a new and better chapter. And, with His grace, and the help of your forgiveness, encouragement, and favor--we shall!

As Pentecostals we believe in and proclaim instantaneous deliverance. But, the most difficult part of our journey may come in the process the Holy Spirit uses to heal us from past racism.

A Christian man was recounting his difficulty of gaining victory over wrongful sexual thought patterns. Prior to his conversion, he had lived a profligate lifestyle. Despite prayer for deliverance, he still found himself wrestling with his pre-Christian memories and behavioral imprints. As he prayed, he sensed the Lord saying to him, "It took you a long time to learn this behavior, and it is going to require some time for you to unlearn it and learn to put on the new life."

I do not want to mislead this conference with the notion that in one great microwave moment we can close the past and go on to an ideal future. There will be struggles, set-backs, and misunderstandings, but we are committed for the long haul to seek the Lord that He would give us a church "without spot or wrinkle, washed in the blood of the Lamb."

Over the years, we have learned some unacceptable behavior with regard to race relations. We need to unlearn many things and become sensitive in areas where we have had no sensitivity. We are imperfect people. Only by the grace of God are any of us employed for His kingdom and glory.

I am grateful the Lord did not cut off the potential discipleship of James and John because they began as racial supremacists, calling Gentiles "dogs" and wanting to burn down Samaritan villages. The Lord remained patient with them and lovingly pulled them up to His view of a new humanity. Nor did the Lord withdraw His presence from the Jerusalem church when it failed intentionally to fulfill the Great Commission because of its own ethnocentricity. The Holy Spirit guided the church incrementally through the inclusion of Cornelius, the conversion of Saul, and the planting of the missionary church of Antioch. Almost 15 years of preparation took place between the resurrection of Christ and the launching of the first missionary journey. The Church readied itself to take on the Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8 assignment.

Likewise, it may take us time to forge the kind of family we want. It may take many hours of patient and difficult listening. As white Pentecostals, we need the wisdom to understand that although our black brothers and sisters forgive us, there is still the human need to release anxiety, express frustration, and openly doubt our sincerity. We will be tempted to preach sermons to you on the need for grace toward us. We will question the sincerity of your forgiveness when you dredge up elements of our past we wish to leave buried in the sea of God's forgetfulness. And, all of us have theological and organizational differences and will be tempted to mistrust motives for those differences as being racially inspired.

But, God will help us heal, because He wants the Church to be as inclusive as His own grace.

So, let us join hands and hearts and begin the journey by recovering the solidarity of Azusa Street, and then by asking the Holy Spirit, should Jesus tarry, to make a record of the Pentecostal church in North America a shining example of brotherhood of all races and all peoples in the years to come.

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