

What 2 Spirit-Filled Revolutionaries Uncovered as the Spirit of Racism Taunted the Nation

On Aug. 12, 2017, Charlottesville, Virginia, became the unlikely epitome of racially motivated violence in America.

A statue of Robert E. Lee served as the backdrop for the dramatic scene that engulfed the campus of the University of Virginia and the downtown Main Street area, where Heather Heyer was struck by a car driven by hate and killed. The nation was re-introduced to a small group of Americans willing to brandish burning torches in the Virginia night, unmistakably harkening back to a time of hooded mobs terrorizing black and minority residents.

Sadly, most Americans are content to idly accept less overt displays of racism in the systems of society. Aug. 12, however, was impossible to ignore.

What continues to be made abundantly clear is that Charlottesville is not an anomaly in the nation. It's merely the most recent crack in the dam of pent- up hostility. A few years ago, I felt the Lord had spoken to me that the enemy had planted landmines of racial strife all across the country, and they were just waiting to be set off. To be clear, that "enemy," of course, is not any human being. It is a spiritual enemy and demonic through and through. It finds a body in our unjust systems, attitudes and apathy, and it rages against the image of God in others who look a little different than ourselves.

Will Ford and I had the privilege of being asked to participate in a Charlottesville event on Dec. 2, organized in

response to the violence and tragedy. We joined with Christian city leaders and national leaders to address the issue with prayer and action. It was an honor to link arms with women and men unwilling to let hate have the last word in these matters. At a press conference in front of the Lee statue, which is now covered with a black tarp, Will and I were introduced as “very interesting gentlemen” and “who represent the heart of the gathering.” Our contribution was to tell our incredible story of providence and to help lead prayer that would mark hearts and motivate action. What was particularly rewarding for us was the fact that Virginia serves as the centerpiece of our story.

Virginia is the birthplace of America. It is rich with history and overflowing with stories. Today’s culture, however, is wrestling with how to tell those stories. Some feel threatened by revisionist history, while others see an intentional perpetuation of the mindsets of a bygone era—namely that of slavery. As Will and I have prayed over these matters, an important aspect has emerged that we would like to address. It deals with the statues and memorials that are dominating discussions in cities all across America.

Memorials serve one grand purpose: to remind us of people and events in the past that helped get us to where we are now. In their ideal expression, we learn from those pivotal moments how to help improve the future by not repeating the mistakes of the past. In their less-than-ideal form, they can elevate ideas that quietly suggest, “Let’s get back to the way things were.” It’s in those moments when minority communities, in particular, are thinking, “No thanks.”

Take the Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville as an example. The city remains torn over whether or not to remove it. While participating in the gathering there, I asked several leaders what they thought about it. To my surprise, they were equally divided on the topic. “Oh, it definitely needs to stay. Lee was an important figure in Virginia

history," one pastor responded. "That statue is a constant reminder of slavery and racism," another clergyman declared. Is there a right or wrong answer to this dilemma? It's important to know some forgotten history to understand the backdrop of this controversy in America right now.

The first film to ever premiere in the United States White House was called *Birth of a Nation*. In 1915, Democratic President Woodrow Wilson allowed the screening of the movie as a favor to his friend, the author of the book on which the film was based. That book was titled *The Clansman*. The film, which was revolutionary for its time and a commercial success, dramatized the founding of the Ku Klux Klan, depicting them as heroic figures set against uncivilized and sexually aggressive black men in the South.

Although the KKK had been dismantled during the later years of reconstruction after the Civil War, the film effectively galvanized a resurgence of the Klan and was used as a recruitment tool. That year the KKK was reborn on top of Stone Mountain connected to the film's release in Atlanta. It is not a mere coincidence then that many statues memorializing Confederate leaders began to emerge throughout the south. The Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville was commissioned shortly afterward in 1917.

It could be said that the racist film *Birth of a Nation* helped fuel the spirit of the age. What must be acknowledged is that many of the statues and memorials that emerged at that time were the product of a racist agenda. Mind you, this was all happening during the Jim Crow era, when racial segregation ruled the South. The United Daughters of the Confederacy, who helped organize the unveiling of the statue, released a statement in the wake of August 12th saying their organization, "totally denounces any individual or group that promotes racial divisiveness or white supremacy." Then, a few days after Will and I helped lead prayer in Charlottesville, an Imperial Wizard with the KKK, admitted in a CNN interview

that many white supremacists had come on Aug. 12 to incite a race war.

So what can be said? After a closer look at the commission of the Charlottesville Lee statue, did it have a racist origin or not? The reality is whether or not the statue stays or goes, people on either side will have hearts that need healing, which is why we must continue to cover this matter in prayer.

Will Ford and I met January 17, 2005, which was Martin Luther King Jr. celebration day. On the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, where Dr. King gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, I joined with others from around the country for a prayer meeting. Little did I know, but Will had also been led to attend that same prayer meeting. What has been significant to both of us through the years is that we met in a prayer meeting, and I think that fact speaks of what God wants to do in America right now.

I genuinely believe we are going to find each other in the prayer meetings. If we will lay down our agendas and seek each other out to advance God's kingdom, there is no limit to what God can accomplish in us and through us. It's a wise statement, "You can do more than pray, but you can't do anything until you have prayed." It's in these kinds of prayer meetings that God-ideas and action come together with brothers and sisters moving in unity. God promises to pour out the anointing oil in those settings, so I believe the prayer meeting is the great incubator for godly activism and societal change.

Only a united church can heal a divided nation.