

How Pentecost Breaks the Racial Barrier

Pentecost and racism—what an oxymoron! But the realities of widespread blatant racism in our nation and the overall poor response of the church have created more hatred than healing. Our current climate, in which we have Christian leaders and laypeople alike aligning with or spewing out racist rhetoric—at times in the name of God—has created a great chasm within and outside of the church.

When the late William J. Seymour birthed the Azusa Street Revival, Black, white, Asian and Native American people received the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues. They worshipped together, defying cultural barriers. The impact of the Azusa Revival caused Frank Bartleman to write that the “color line was washed away in the Blood.”

This took place more than 115 years ago. But look where we are today!

2020 was an uncomfortable year to say the least. Looking forward to 2021, every indication leads us to believe more challenges lie ahead. Dr. Dwight McKissic, one of the prominent Black pastors in the Southern Baptist Convention, cut ties with the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and potentially with the Southern Baptist Convention over racial disparities.

I have committed my entire adult life to planting, leading and cultivating multiethnic churches. I have witnessed God bring people of all ethnicities together. I have also had the privilege of co-laboring with non-Black leaders from across the nation for the past 25 years. I not only call them my friends; they are my family.

However, I must acknowledge some personal realities. I see ethnicities come together weekly in a worship service, only to go back to their separate lives and communities. I believe in recent years, the church has done well at gathering ethnicities together for worship, but we have not been as successful in witnessing authentic racial reconciliation.

I have been in worship services where people walked out when I stood up to speak. They didn't know I was the pastor or guest speaker. I was intentional to ensure my platform reflected my congregation, and at times I had to do so at a price. It is significant and sometimes challenging for a non-Black person to serve on the team with a lead Black pastor.

I believe subconsciously, as a Black leader who has a passion to see racial reconciliation, I was willing to do whatever it took to make that racial healing a reality. At times, that meant being overly sensitive to the needs of my non-Black team members and congregants. Attempting to balance the preferences of different ethnicities is not an easy task.

I have endured all the criticism: "It's too loud;" "It's not loud enough;" "It's too intense;" "It's not intense enough;" "It's too Black" or "It's too white." I could tell other stories of racial tension I have encountered over the years, but I want to share what I recently faced during the pandemic.

Last year when the stay-at-home order was lifted in our community, my 17-year-old son began meeting with his friends to play basketball in a subdivision near our home. One afternoon, my son and his friends were playing basketball, and a resident called the police. When the officers arrived, they approached the young men on the court and specifically called out my son (the only Black young man in the group) and proceeded to ask if he had any drugs or weapons on him. He said no.

My son has been raised among incredible law enforcement

officers; we even have a neighbor who serves on the same police force. We have great respect for law enforcement and are very grateful for their service. Beyond the fact that this situation angered me, I was intrigued by the conversation that ensued when my son and his friends returned to our home from the incident.

My son's friends expressed their anger and shared how they were confronting the officers on my son's behalf. I explained that there was no way my son could question or confront the officers because his reality was different from theirs. It was quite an enlightening moment for them all. While it takes real work to have discussions like these, I have, and I will continue to give my life to serve all people. Our church community has had a great impact in our community for good, and I know so much more is possible.

My son was in our neighborhood and has never had one negative incident with the law or authority in his life but was severely impacted by the racial climate of our nation.

As we celebrate Pentecost, I remain hopeful in the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ to reconcile all people to the Father and the power of the Holy Spirit to bring spiritual awaking to the church and our nation. I long for the day we witness the body of Christ celebrate racial diversity, equality and unity to the world. Here are three things we must do to build bridges of healing:

We Must Confront

We cannot heal or reconcile what we do not confront. We must acknowledge that it is alive in the heart of some Christians of all ethnicities and that there is no justification for racism to reign in the heart of a Christ-follower.

We must admit that racism is a sin issue according to Scripture. Galatians 3:26-29 says, "You are all sons of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been

baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, and there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." Meanwhile, James 2:9 says: "But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as sinners."

As Christians, we should all be committed to loving our "neighbor" regardless of their race. More specifically, I want to address those of us who embrace Pentecostalism. The day of Pentecost is depicted in Scripture as the most prominent and powerful display of God's heart to unify His body by the indwelling and empowering person of the Holy Spirit, with the evidence of speaking in tongues.

Acts 2:1-4 says: "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like a mighty rushing wind came from heaven, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. There appeared to them tongues as of fire, being distributed and resting on each of them, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to speak."

It's amazing how much emphasis has been placed on speaking in tongues. I would suggest that it's an indictment against the Pentecostal church to speak in tongues and not be able to speak in love. As we study Scripture, we discover the goal is not only to be baptized in the Holy Spirit but to continue maturing as we learn to walk in step with Him.

Part of the original intent of Pentecost was to unify the body of Christ. That idea was reintroduced in our nation in 1906 through the Azusa Street Revival, yet the ills of the day prevailed and sabotaged what was being birthed by the Holy Spirit. I am convinced that we must confront racism head-on. If we do, I believe we will begin to witness the convicting power of the Holy Spirit.

We Must Be Convicted

Every Christ-follower should stop, examine their own heart and embrace the conviction of the Holy Spirit if racism is detected. Conviction will lead to repentance. Racism is not a surface issue; it is embedded in a person's heart or root system and cannot be excised by superficial means.

Biblical repentance requires us to change the way we think and go in a different direction. I am not suggesting that we need more solemn assemblies or public displays of repentance among Christian leaders of all races, only to walk off the public stage with the same heart and root system. We need transformational change.

I know we are an optics generation. We love platforms, pulpits and stages. But authentic and sustainable change occurs at the grassroots level. I receive inquiries, primarily from white pastors, who desire to know how they should respond when we are in the heat of a racial injustice incident.

I encourage leaders to express empathy over eloquence and compassion over complicity. Sometimes just showing up and saying, "I am with you, and I am here for you" is what's needed. We can never go wrong when we demonstrate love and compassion toward one another. Personal conviction by the Holy Spirit will lead to change.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in his book, *Strength to Love*, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of convenience and comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

We must examine our own hearts and respond accordingly, based on what the Lord shows us. First Corinthians 1:10 says: "Now I ask you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak in agreement and that there be no divisions among you. But be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."

We Need Conversations

One of the ways we can begin to build bridges and harmony around racism is through meaningful dialogue. I honor the efforts and investments of great leaders and movements within the church to address racism in conferences, conventions and solemn assemblies. However, I hope we can begin to make sustainable traction through engaging conversations.

Biblical discipleship is the primary ingredient needed to move the needle in a redemptive direction when it comes to racial healing. If the church would engage the principles of biblical discipleship as Jesus modeled, we will witness the Holy Spirit usher in a spiritual awaking in the church and our nation that will be filled with power and sustainability.

Biblical discipleship can create safe spaces conducive for believers of all ethnicities to begin authentic, raw, safe, meaningful and transformational conversations about racism. We can't preach or pray racism away; we must employ the practice of engaging in conversations with those who are different from us.

We must be willing to initiate conversations that begin to chisel away at the walls that divide us—such as fear, pride, arrogance, elitism and prejudice. In my city, a group of Black, white and Hispanic pastors have engaged in authentic, meaningful and transformational conversations about racism for the past nine years.

It has not been a journey without challenges, tears, skepticism, awkwardness, repentance and forgiveness. It has stretched us! But the results for our community have been priceless. I believe engaging healthy conversations facilitated through discipleship and empowered by the Holy Spirit can be a game changer for the church. Transformational conversations over time will breed understanding, understanding will lead to trust and trust will create

community.

As we celebrate Pentecost, I pray that we pause to earnestly seek God, prepare ourselves by doing the necessary work for change and proceed with humility. I also pray for pastors across the globe to be encouraged and strengthened in their assignments. Together, we must confront racism, embrace the conviction of the Holy Spirit and engage in transformational conversations. I am confident that the King is up to good concerning His church, and the best is still yet to come!

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Pastor Demetrius Miles is a fully devoted Christ-follower, communicator, coach and lead pastor of Tucson Church International. He holds a master's degree from Southwestern Christian University and is honored to serve leaders nationally.

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