**Pentecostalism: A Movement In Sync with the Culture of Racism in America!**

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**Abstract**

In this paper, I consider the topic of racism in America, the Christian Church, and in Pentecostalism. Historically there has been a tepid response to racism by the Christian. Although many individuals who are Christian’s have voiced and demonstrated opposition to the practice of racism the Christian as a whole has not actively supported the rights of black people to be equal citizens in the United States. I examine the actions and words of whites from an historical and religious perspective with a focus on Pentecostalism. My discussion shows that while Pentecostalism is not a movement that promotes racism some individuals from the Clergy to the pew who profess to Pentecostals and recipients of the ‘second blessing’ embrace and practice racism.

INTRODUCTION

*I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today. (Excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.’s I Have a Dream Speech).[[1]](#footnote-1)*

“Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The idea of one loving his brother and sister may require a workaround by one who claims to be superior to another. The workaround may include characterizing and describing one who may be considered a brother and sister as inhuman, beastlike, a complete and total other from the one who believes themselves supreme.

In our present age and situation, some find the words of Dr. King inspiring. In some instances, they are used as a mantra to diffuse discussions about racism with a propensity toward amelioration. The challenge for some who endorse this portion of Dr. King's speech is to show how his words crafted from a dream state have transcended the aspirational condition of when said words were uttered to actual living and breathing reality. Dr. King's 1963 speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial reminded the nation that racism is a carcinogen in the concept of freedom held so dear in the land of the free and the home of the brave.

Sixty years after King's famous speech, America continues to grapple with the existence of racism. Unfortunately, Frank Bartleman's encouraging words in his observation of the Azusa revival (1906), that "the color line was washed away by the blood" for many have been null and void by years of neglect in the Christian community at large.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The existence of racism, although dismissed by some and perhaps to a degree overemphasized by others, is not a non-reality, nor is it a scripturally supported practice. Some would argue that God sanctions racial division and engage Scripture with a crafted hermeneutic that they believe supports their argument. Dr. King stated in 1960 that “the most segregated hour in America is 11:00 am on Sunday when people attended church.[[4]](#footnote-4) While it may be an elementary task to identify the existence of racism in America, it is equally so when discussing the existence of the same in the Western church. The examination of racism in the Western church undertaken in this paper focuses on its presence in Pentecostalism. The reality of racial division in Pentecostalism is not uncommon to humankind; however, it is a strange fruit to be associated with the tree of life, Christ. In my paper, I will examine the cultivation of the fruit of racism amongst Pentecostals and why it is not a post-conversion experience but an experience that limits the power of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and distorts the image of Christ in the believer's life.

In undertaking this task, one may find that the subject of racism may, within circles of religion in America, evoke feelings of discomfort and, in some instances, a posture of complete denial salt and peppered with a tone that elicits indifference. Some may even resort to elementary responses such as “prove it" and, of the baser sort, "stop complaining."

In discussing racism, one may find it necessary to define the term. One way Merriam Webster defined ‘racism’ is a belief that race is a fundamental determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race." With this definition in mind, let us consider for a moment some pillars of the Christian faith of the twentieth century who held expressed thoughts that some may consider racist. Bob Jones (1893-1968), a South Carolinian Evangelist and Christian University founder, stated, "God Almighty did not make of the human race one race in the sense that He did not fix the bounds of their habitation.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Evangelist Jones may have found an ally in Elijah Muhammad, as they believed God ordained segregation. One may find that each of these men held a view that is a loose interpretation of Acts 17:26, with Jones advocating the idea the word "fixed" and "determined" have no synonymous connection. Of necessity and in conjunction with the need to delineate the use of terms, a segregationist may not be synonymous with a supremacist. However, one may believe in the validity of each and practice both. For example, let us consider one regarded as the father of Pentecostalism. Charles Fox Parham, who eventually distanced himself from the Azusa Street stream of Pentecostalism, also, in his doctrinal development, crafted a theological position on race that was founded on his belief in British-Israelism. "British-Israelism (also known as B.I., Anglo-Israelism, and “the identity”) is the belief that the Anglo-Saxon peoples are the direct biological descendants of the ten tribes of Israel who never returned to their homeland after the Assyrian exile of the eighth century, B.C.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Parham’s affinity toward maintaining the status quo in the age he was born reflects the power that one’s cultural influences have, even in the face of what may be understood as a powerful move of God during the Azusa Street Revival.

*Pentecostal Roots Run Deep*

In America, the history of the sojourn of Black people has been rife with acts of violence toward them that, in many ways, defy an intellectual grasp of the depth and magnitude of the hatred that one group of people can enact, condone and justify over another group of people. The complexity of this reality becomes even more mind-boggling when the perpetrators of violence claim to have known Jesus Christ as their lord and savior. The development of Western Christianity includes a mix of interpretations of Scripture crafted in the minds of some that enlist God as the implementer and justifier of crimes against humanity. However, it should be stipulated at this point that the claim of humanity for many in the early days of the republic was not a designation that would be conferred upon those who were victims of human trafficking and enslaved in the home of the brave and the land of the free. The fact is that the inhabitants of America who considered themselves white elevated themselves to a level of superiority in their thinking over all others who did not share their whiteness. While many whites recognized that the enslavement of blacks was wrong, the deep seeded belief that they were superior to black people was alive and well in their personhood, albeit lying dormant in some instances.

To discuss racism in America as a cultural phenomenon that impacts the citizenry in various ways and for this writing, the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement requires an examination of history to identify the origin of the social carcinogen. My examination of the history of racism in America, the Pentecostal-Charismatic Movement, and the halls of Academia specifically relating to Divinity schools is not a rant or finger-pointing exercise crafted to speak of the evils of America. Whatever America's challenges and shortcomings have been and are, the reality is that it is the greatest nation on the face of the earth. Americans must celebrate that truth and, at the same time, work to rid the country of elements such as racism which has a deleterious effect on America’s position in the world.

The Statue of Liberty monument is located within the territorial jurisdiction of the State of New York. At the base of this monolithic structure are the words, give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This excerpt from a beautiful poem inscribed on the symbol of freedom known throughout the world invites the downtrodden to a land that is ready and willing to accept them. However, there is a group of people in America whose ancestors never saw the inscription on this statue. They were not invited; they were purchased and forced into an existence that systematically oppressed them. Of course, I am speaking of black people. Black people, who arrived as slaves to America in great numbers, were not viewed as people to embrace and welcome; instead, they were purchased and enslaved. Lerone Bennett, scholar, and historian, informs us that "the newly purchased slaves, properly branded and chained, were rowed out to the slave ships for the dreaded Middle Passage across the Atlantic."[[8]](#footnote-8) These huddle masses were not brought to America to enjoy freedom; on the contrary, they were stripped of freedom. Herein lies the beginning of the systemic practice of racism in the nation that would become the United States of America.

Slavery, or the Peculiar Institution, set the tone for so-called race relations in America. Enslaved Black people were treated like animals and viewed as less than human. The conditions experienced by enslaved black people and inflicted by whites were vicious, inhumane, and diabolical. The laws of the land upheld the devilish actions of whites toward enslaved black people, and although the idea of the separation of church and state was bantered about, for the most part, both were in harmony concerning the perceived inferiority of blacks.

Let us now consider some of the ways racism inculcated into the American way of life adopted by white people, but not necessarily all. As mentioned above, the laws of the land upheld the state of blacks. Laws were enacted that limited the movement of black people by relegating the same to the authority of the slave master. One example of systemic racism development in America is seen in the words of one of America's early Supreme Court justices who wrote the majority opinion in the Dred Scot case of 1857. Chief Justice Roger Taney, a God-fearing member of the Catholic Church, made it known that he believed black people were inferior and justifiably subjected to being servants to the white man. Taney stated that black people "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit. He was bought and sold and treated as an ordinary article of merchandise and traffic whenever profit could be made by it."[[9]](#footnote-9) The words of Taney proclaimed during the antebellum period reinforced the belief that blacks are not equal to white people. The planting and cultivating of systemic racism practiced by a legal expert was not originated with him; Taney was a highly respected and religiously connected teacher of racism who contributed to the development of others which included whites who were and are Christians from various denominations, some of whom were respected, theologians and church leaders.

The challenge for many whites has been and for some continues to be accepting black people as their equals. For some whites, black people, or in a term prevalent in the 19th century into the 20th century, 'negro' people were beasts. For example, Rev. Buckner Payne (1799-1889) authored a pamphlet that described from his hermeneutical point of view the origin of the Negro. According to Reverend Payne, "the negro is a beast that God created before Adam and Eve and like all created beasts has no soul."[[10]](#footnote-10) The dear reverend’s thoughts were codified and shared with the public as truth corroborated from his vantage point and for others as an act of God. The question arises, can a person who is a Christian, white, baptized in the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues retain a mindset that believes that God made them superior to all non-whites and, more specifically, in America, black people?

In the introduction of this paper, I provided information about the racist proclivities of Charles Fox Parham, who was born twenty-seven years before the end of the 19th century. Parham is known as the father of Pentecostalism, and one may conclude that he produced spiritual offspring who held him in high esteem. He was a devout Christian who founded a bible school in Topeka, Kansas. One of his students was William Seymour, a black man. However, Parham did not allow Seymour to sit in classes. "Seymour was only allowed to listen outside the classroom through the half-open door.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The focus on Parham is not to promote the idea that he was unusual in his racism but that he represented a negative view of black people that was prevalent in his lifetime and, in some instances, continues into our present age and situation.

For Parham, black people were of the heathen class who he not only excluded from his bible classes but also disassociated them from “being part of the body of Christ.”[[12]](#footnote-12) This man of God, who expressed knowledge of Pentecost and the blessing of speaking in tongues, developed a scripture hermeneutic that was a product of sin consciousness rather than righteousness consciousness. True to form and in keeping with what may be considered a supremacist mindset, Parham, as stated earlier, is referred to as the father of Pentecostalism. Labeling a white man as the 'father' of some esteemed discipline is part and parcel of white American thought-life, and practice. William Seymour was a black man whom God used in an environment that gave no appearance of wealth and, for some, was the locus of the lowly and dismissed members of society. "Born in Louisiana, the son of former slaves, Seymour was a short, stocky African-American man who was blind in one eye and graced by a humble spirit."[[13]](#footnote-13) This description of Seymour is interesting in its inclusion of the words ‘humble spirit’ as it is the state that is most acceptable for many whites concerning blacks as it fits their low regard for black people. I am speaking in the non-biblical sense of the word humble, as submission to God is the position every Christian should assume. However, humility may be a non-sequitur when one believes they are superior. Born in Muscatine, Iowa, Parham is "generally recognized as the formulator of Pentecostal doctrine and theological founder of the movement.”[[14]](#footnote-14) This designation, this description, would not be conferred upon William Seymour by humankind. Yet, according to Synan, God, who did not form Pentecostal doctrine and is not the theological founder of the movement, chose to elevate black William Seymour to shepherd a movement where His Spirit impacted the lives of people from all over the world. "From 1906 through 1909, the Azusa Street Mission became the focus of attention not only of Los Angeles but of thousands of people around the world as news spread about the mission that stood at the heart of revival."[[15]](#footnote-15)

The roots of racism in America run deep and produce tainted fruit in a plethora of places. This reality is evident in what took place in Los Angelos in 1906. The late Dr. Frederick K.C. Price notes in reference to the Azusa Street revival:

Because a black man, William Seymour, was the point man for this awakening; instead of remaining together in esteem, respect, affection, and friendship with African Americans, in a short time, white Christians, in essence, said, we're not going to mix with black people and have congregations and churches with them.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The white Christians referred to by Dr. Price chose to leave the move of God and start a movement of their own doing amongst people they identified with and appreciated – white people. In many instances, the propensity toward the doctrine of white supremacy has led to revisionist writings to elevate white people and, in turn, in line with the cultural nurturing of racism, to minimize, ignore, or deny the existence of excellence in the lives of black people. "Whites have also negated black American W. J. Seymour's authenticity as a leader, noting that he was a ‘disciple’ of Parham. All this led to a radical split within the Pentecostal movement along racial lines from the first years of its formation.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

The racial divide amongst Pentecostals during the Azusa Street revival and beyond is not a phenomenon specific to the movement. Still, it is a manifestation of what existed in some of the white people who attended and decided to leave so that they would not be identified as being with black people on an equal basis. Racism, however, is a historical reality in Pentecostalism, which continues, although not exclusively in our present age and situation. The lines of division in the Pentecostal movement may be seen in the advent of churches and denominations that are Pentecostal White and Pentecostal Black. White denominations include the Assemblies of God and the Church of God (Tennessee and Indiana). One may find it ironic that some whites who distanced themselves from the Pentecostal events at Azusa received their ministerial credentials from a black man. The development of Afro-Pentecostalism is a clear indicator that the integration that was evident at Azusa had begun to wane.

"From 1909 to 1914, the Church of God in Christ functioned as a federation of three clergy networks: the original religious body led by Charles Harrison Mason, a nearly all white-religious body led by Howard Goss and E.N. Bell, and a nearly all-white religious body with a few Latinos led by Leonard P. Adams.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Eventually, the clergy networks split, and the racial divide widened, although some whites attended the Church of God in Christ.[[19]](#footnote-19) Due to racism, unity in the Body of Pentecostal believers is relegated to the congregations primarily and predominately occupied by members of the same race. This dichotomy between Christian unity and racial segregation is practiced and silently condoned by some Pentecostals. The late Dr. Leonard Lovett observed, "While strongly condemning sins of the flesh, such as alcohol, smoking, prohibitions gambling, adultery, abortion, homosexuality, etc., classical Pentecostals have been virtually silent on sins of the spirit such as racism whose locus is pride."[[20]](#footnote-20)

It appears that for some Pentecostals, the social vice of racism is not worth discussion, nor is it viewed as a sin that a move of the Spirit should eradicate or deliver the afflicted both carrier and victims of the carrier from. In this regard, it appears that Pentecostalism, as practiced by some whites, is in sync with systematic racism in America. White and Black relations in Pentecostal have, in some instances, reflected the culture of racism in America and efforts that may be viewed as the extended hand of Christian fellowship that whites choose to allow. The Pentecostal move of separation that saw the development of white denominations did include black members; however, due to the lack of leadership opportunities, another split along racial lines occurred. Tisby notes, "At the request of a black minister and his supporters who desired more autonomy, the denomination (Church of God) permitted a separate black General Assembly so long as it was overseen by white men."[[21]](#footnote-21)

The idea of white supervision in the affairs of black people is not Pentecostalism, nor is it a phenomenon that grew out of revivals beyond Azusa Street. Supervision of this magnitude is a continuation of the institutional racism that began at the dawn of America's existence. It is a means of maintaining white dominance and control of black people that functions politically, economically, educationally, and religiously. Some whites who ascribe to Pentecostalism were racist prior to experiencing the baptism of the Holy Spirit and maintained their cultural affinity toward the practice after the blessed event. White supremacy has been a motivating force driving black people to develop their own institutions, including churches, some Pentecostal. One may see that racism has also been a factor in the development of Christian black education institutions of higher learning. The advent of black Christian colleges and universities in response to the existence of racism in America has not deterred some blacks from seeking admission in predominantly white institutions of higher learning, which includes schools of Divinity. Predominantly white Divinity schools do not overtly ascribe to racism, nor do they, from a legal standpoint, allow expressions of the same to be expressed in or to comply with standards of accreditation that ensure access to government financial assistance. However, for some predominantly white schools of Divinity, the presence of black faculty and black studies are minimal. For the most part Divinity school curriculum is written by whites, books are written by whites, whites grade assignments, and whites confer degrees. Blacks who attend these predominantly white schools of Divinity may find that their work is scrutinized by some professors who may be progenitors of racist ancestors.

The late Dr. James Hal Cone graduated from a predominantly white seminary, and his experience with his white professors motivated him to analyze the methods and content of Christian theology. His analysis led him to recognize that the state of theology in Christian America was void of any content that addressed the black experience in America. As a result, Dr. Cone produced a body of work that addressed the experience of black people in America – Black theology. The example of Dr. Cone is of one not tolerating or succumbing to racism in America, especially in the halls of Academia. For Cone, Black theology is a means of dismantling the racist informed power structure in America that has systematically promoted and continuously enforced black people's subjugation. Cone understood the historical ramifications of white supremacist propaganda and developed his theology relying on God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. His faith in God and His Word, with a keen understanding of the black experience, allowed him to see that Scripture has been and is integral to the uplift of the black race. Cone saw God as the liberator of the oppressed, expressed in the resurrected Jesus through the Holy Spirit. According to Cone, "It was Scripture that enabled slaves to affirm a view of God that differed radically from that of the slave master."[[22]](#footnote-22)

There have been many champions of justice that have emerged from the black community in America such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Medgar Evers. Afro-Pentecostals have not remained silent in the face of racism in America and recognized that acquiescing to the norms and values of white culture did not completely benefit the black community. Afro-Pentecostalism challenged these values and norms at their core.”[[23]](#footnote-23) The late Bishop Arthur Brazier of Chicago was an Afro-Pentecostal who challenged the values and norms of white society. He understood that America enjoyed the labor of black people who were instrumental in building the nation. One of his goals was “to destroy the myth of the intellectual and moral supremacy of the whites.”[[24]](#footnote-24) The silence of White Pentecostals in the face of racist practices in the United States appears as indifference to the black struggle for freedom. As mentioned earlier, white Pentecostals preach with intensity against social vices but do not, in totality, view racism as a vice. On the other hand, Brazier embraced the charismata of Pentecostalism and practiced "the gift of demonstrating, organizing, and publicizing as another kind of prophecy.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Brazier's form of Pentecostalism did not receive the kind of publicity in Pentecostal-Charismatic circles on the order of the Toronto Blessing, Brownsville, or the Rodney Howard Brown experience, and this is, unfortunately, part of the norm as it relates to Black Pentecostalism. The Azusa Street experience, although widely known in 1906, has, in recent years, reemerged as the beginning of the Pentecostal Movement in America. It should be noted and without criticism that the recounting of the Azusa street revival in print and distributed in the marketplace has primarily been the work of white authors.

*A Present-Day Response to Racism in America through a Pentecostal Lens*

In many ways, the black experience in the 21st century is more of the same experience. Demonstrations in the 21st century against white brutality and oppression reminiscent of the 1960s have been employed to voice black concerns and dissatisfaction with the status quo. These protests are one means of addressing the ongoing attack on the right of black people to exist as equal citizens. Some Pentecostals have awakened to the reality of racism’s existence and continued practice in America and specifically to its active presence in Pentecostalism. Pentecostals who have opted for telling the truth and endeavoring to be like Jesus have chosen to acknowledge the existence of racism in the ranks. Some Pentecostals have chosen to address racism spiritually, intellectually, actively, and practically with a determined focus to combat it in a Christ-like manner. One example of this kind of determined action is seen in what has been referred to as "the Memphis Miracle of 1994," where black and white Pentecostals, in a spirit of reconciliation, formed the Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches of North America. During that 1994 meeting, B. E. Underwood, head of the Pentecostal Holiness denomination, declared the conference opened. What a difference it would have made in the civil rights movement in America if all the children of the Pentecostal revival had stood together.”[[26]](#footnote-26) One may see in the mission of PCCNA in the 21st century that reconciliation remains a desired goal expressed in the organization's Race Relation Commission.

The eradication of racism in America may be affected by the reconciliation of white and black members of the Body of Christ. Unity in the body is necessary; as the Apostle Paul stated unequivocally, unity must be in "faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Racism is a demonic orchestration designed to divide and conquer those who profess to be Christ-like.

CONCLUSION

Is Pentecostalism in synch with systemic racism in America? The simple answer to the question is no. The tainted fruit of racism, when allowed to grow in the tree of Pentecostalism, is not a post-conversion experience but a sinfully inseminated experience that limits the power of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and distorts the image of Christ in the life of one who believes yet thinks, acts, and does so in a manner that is anti-Christlike. However, there are some whites who, in their born-again Holy Ghost-filled experience, hold a deep seeded belief that God made them superior to non-whites and, in America, specifically black people. This heartfelt belief among people of this mindset does not necessarily have to be enjoined by a group to be practiced and maintained. Yet, racist ideology may be taught and expressed in various ways, including employing Scripture to justify supremacist beliefs. I have noted the racist rhetoric of white people such as Parham and Jones. In my continued writings on racism in Christianity in America, I will address noted white theologians and authors such as Finis Dake, who developed a scripture hermeneutic that supported his view that black people are inferior to whites.

The black experience in America has been and continues to be likened to the Israelite experience in the book of Exodus. Some black people have embraced the story to the point where they are looking for a black leader on the order of Moses to deliver them from white oppression. In my view, this longing negates the gift of salvation that has already been given as the result of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The late James Cone, the father of Black theology, recognized the finished work of Christ and believed that the ministry of Jesus was a ministry to the oppressed. Dr. Cone, of course, focused his theological position on the oppression of black people in America.

The challenge for black people is to be able to refrain from continuing to express their dissatisfaction with the oppression enacted against them by some whites to white people. In some black Christian circles, on occasion one may say that the devil is busy. However, there is no indication in the gospels that Jesus complained to the devil about anything. I am not suggesting that racist white people are the devil, but I will suggest that some engage in the work of Satan when they oppress people, including black people. In the old testament, we read the Genesis account of Jacob and Laban (see Gen. Chapters 29 and 31), and on that account, we are informed that Jacob complained to Laban for years about his wages and mistreatment to no avail. It was not until Jacob stopped complaining to Laban and went to God that his situation turned around to his good and Laban's detriment. My purpose in saying that is that some of the black community's Moses-like leaders are dead. The modern-day Laban in the black experience continues to change the rules, wages, renege on promises, steal, kill, and destroy. Yet, Black people continue to march in front of their Laban without divine marching orders in the vein of a God-ordained march (see Joshua 6:1-27).

In the 21st Century, Holy Ghost revival must not be mired by division and hate but instead must reflect maturity in Christ, which is demonstrated in fulness when one has faith in God (Mk. 11:22). In closing, “without faith, it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

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