The Dubious Legacy of Charles Parham: Racism and Cultural Insensitivities among Pentecostals

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Introduction

Racism remains one of the most pernicious sins affecting the Church throughout our world and one with which my own life has been entwined, a cancer that erodes both the Christian freedom of individuals and the essential unity of the whole Church and its healthy functioning as the body of Christ. It is not enough to point to racism around us and say that the church is “not like that.” I have lived in an overtly racist society for most of my life, seeking for the past thirty years to challenge the prejudice and subtle, often unconscious racism and segregated churches that exist, not least among Pentecostals and Charismatics. My passion to bring to light this hypocrisy stems from my own life experiences of overt racism and my deep conviction that wherever there is true freedom in the Spirit there cannot be racism at the same time. Cecil M. Robeck, Jr. has reminded us that it is not helpful to “attempt to assess our predecessors by today’s standards,” nor to “assign them motives... without clear evidence from their own pens and mouths.” He points out that racism is often invisible to the perpetrator. This paper will attempt to provide some evidence that in spite of the glorious claims of racial and cultural inclusivity made in early Pentecostalism, racism and cultural insensitivity have been endemic to the movement throughout its life and throughout the world. But I must immediately add that there are many, many exceptions to this pattern, and that examples are offered here in the hope that we will see something of ourselves and repent.

1 An earlier version of this article was a paper presented for the Mission and Intercultural Studies interest group at the 33rd Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Marquette University, Milwaukee, MI, March 13, 2004. Thanks are given to the Donald Gee Research Centre, Mattersey, England for access to Pentecostal periodicals of the period 1908–25; to the Heritage Pentecostal Research Center, Springfield, Missouri for the digitally produced periodicals; to Gary McGee for copies of Parham’s publications; and to Cecil Robeck for helpful email discussions on this subject.

The Racist Doctrines of Parham

In early 1906, William Seymour was probably unaware of the latent racism that lurked in the heart of the “Projector” of the Apostolic Faith movement, Charles Fox Parham. Had he known it, he probably would never have attended (or rather, half-attended) Parham’s short-term school in Houston, where he learned of the “initial evidence” doctrine; and the subsequent history of Pentecostalism might have been quite different. Still, the facts point to the Azusa Street mission as a role model, a predominantly black but interracial and intercultural church led by an African American. Although Parham’s biographer, James R. Goff, states that his “more blatant racism” emerged long after his break with Seymour in September 1906 and replaced his “paternalistic racism,”3 his books A Voice Crying in the Wilderness (first published as early as 1902) and The Everlasting Gospel (1911) indicate the contrary. In 1902, Parham’s British (or Anglo-)Israelism, which proclaimed the spiritual and racial superiority of the white Anglo-Saxon race, is full blown, complete with an identification of the throne of David with the British royal family courtesy of the prophet Jeremiah (who is supposed to have taken King Zedekiah’s daughter to Ireland), and an identification of Britain with “Ephraim” and the United States with “Manasseh” among the ten “lost tribes.” Many commentators, including Parham’s biographer Goff, have failed to see the intrinsically racist character of British Israelism. Parham got these ideas early on in his ministry in the 1890s.4 In 1900 he spent six weeks at Frank Sandford’s Shiloh community in Maine, where he imbibed most of Sandford’s doctrines, including Anglo-Israelism and “missionary tongues,” doctrines that Parham maintained for the rest of his life.5 Parham also entertained notions about the “Antichrist” as “the reincarnation of Judas Iscariot,” did not believe in the immortality of the soul, and held to the doctrine of the annihilation of the wicked. He had strange ideas about what constituted the “Body” and “Bride” of Christ and the meaning of “redemption.” In fact, Parham had an all-round “unorthodox” theology, certainly by evangelical standards! He also advocated Zionism, the creation of the state of Israel, and Jerusalem as the commercial center of the world. But there are even more sinister statements in his books. Parham

4 Personal communication with Leslie Callahan, March 12, 2004.
5 Goff, Fields White, 57–60, 73–74.