

## 98. Moving Toward Ethnic Harmony

By Arland Steen

Acts 2:1-12 (NKJV): *When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. <sup>4</sup> And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. <sup>5</sup> And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. <sup>6</sup> And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. <sup>7</sup> Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, "Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? <sup>8</sup> And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born? <sup>9</sup> Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup> Cretans and Arabs—we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God." <sup>12</sup> So they were all amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "Whatever could this mean?"*

The Day of Pentecost is the point in time where God begins to reverse what took place at the Tower of Babel and end ethnic separatism.

First, let's read the passage.

Genesis 11:1-9 (NKJV): *Now the whole earth had one language and one speech. <sup>2</sup> And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there. <sup>3</sup> Then they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. <sup>4</sup> And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth." <sup>5</sup> But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. <sup>6</sup> And the Lord said, "Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. <sup>7</sup> Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." <sup>8</sup> So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city. <sup>9</sup> Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.*

Now let me give you what I think took place. People will try to make a correlation between the Tower of Babel and the Day of Pentecost – "Well, it looks to me like it was the same thing that happened at Pentecost." It is true they began to speak in other tongues at Babel but it's not the same spirit. The spirit at Pentecost is to bring people together; the spirit that manifested at Babel divided people and it flowed from human pride.

Because the Bible doesn't specifically say what occurred, other than giving the general observation that by the action of the sovereign God, their languages were confused and they were scattered, does that mean He came down and anointed them to speak other languages in order to scatter them? Or, is it possible that something else took place.

I think that rather than God putting His hand upon these, as He did when the flame came upon the heads of those at Pentecost and the sound of the rushing mighty wind announced the presence of

the Almighty Spirit of God – these people didn't get anointed with something by which they could worship God.

In Genesis 11 we see them defying God and we see the humanistic principle that it's all about us and we'll build this and build that and become a super race. This tower will be a monument to the achievement of man.

So God moved in that situation. But I'm not convinced He put His hand upon them. His hand had been upon them and they used that God-ordained unity in a humanistic way and it seems more like that He *removed* His hand from them. I believe when He did that they gave themselves over to the spirit of pride, which is the spirit of the devil himself. I can't prove this but that would make the languages that came forth, ones that were born of pride and the devil. I'm saying the beginning of the separatism was in the overflow of pride, which broke people apart from each other, thus creating ethnic separatism. That can never be defined as the Spirit of God. Whenever God moves, you see people flowing together and in unity – Old and New Testaments.

So this release of confusion was, I believe, administered by the spirits of darkness and that's where ethnic separatism began. And given time and the deepening of fallen nature, ethnic separatism has advanced and grown. Billy Graham said in the 1960's that it was humanity's greatest social problem.

I've given illustrations of this the past two weeks. Prejudice in North America is traditionally defined by the black/white struggle, but it exists around the world in every culture. And, fallen man doesn't need much of a reason to become separate from others because it's so entrenched in our fallen nature. This is proved by the heroin addicts that felt they were superior to other heroin addicts because they became addicts by using "high-grade" heroin whereas the others had become addicts using "low-grade" heroin.

But at Pentecost, the Lord set in motion the reversal of all this.

### **What God Did at Pentecost**

1. He poured out the Holy Spirit announcing the latter days.  
The further we get into the latter days, the more accountable the Church becomes to allow the Holy Spirit to do everything He set out to do - to spread the Gospel to the whole world is one of those things.
2. He poured out the Holy Spirit to bring in the last days' harvest – not just to have our own private joy-bells party – but to bring in the harvest.
3. He poured out the Holy Spirit to neutralize the division of the peoples of the world

This third observation is based on what takes place in the text itself. We recognize there was a supernatural visitation linguistically speaking. The Holy Spirit enabled people to praise God in other tongues.

As a church we identify from a tradition of Pentecost and fully embrace all the signs and wonders we see in the ministry of Jesus and the first-century church, including speaking with other tongues. I hope we're mature enough to recognize that speaking with other tongues is not some emotional gibberish that you engage in to show your spirituality. Instead, He gave tongues for the purpose of praise, prayer, worship. It's the very thing that answers to Charles Wesley's "Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing, my great Redeemer's praise."

Acts 2 speaks clearly about the linguistic miracle that took place. But something else was going on. God was manifesting by His Spirit a desire to encompass the nations of the world.

Some Bible scholars of yesteryear, observed that probably every one of the 120 gathered probably spoke a different language. There were at that time about 120 known linguistic groups in the Roman world. They say God was reversing Babel, that He wanted a coming back together from ethnic separatism. This is undergirded by the facts of what happened in our big neighbor to the east (the city of Los Angeles) at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

At the time the Holy Spirit was poured out at Azusa Street, the movement was led by a very gifted and intelligent man by the name of William Seymour. I say that based on his writings. He was also black.

There were two things happening. First, was the outpouring of the Spirit Himself.

Second, and this was only 40 years removed from the overthrow of slavery and the intention for equality for all peoples, was the flowing together in unity people of all pigmentations. After 40 years the equality that was intentioned had not manifested. Many of the leaders of the outpouring – black and white – said, “It looks to us like what God is trying to do is to bring that kind of” – they didn’t use this term – but “that kind of integration, the removal of ethnic separatism, that has so characterized our country. God is trying to overthrow that by His Spirit and bring people together.”

These gatherings were a stark contrast to the rest of society because they were so thoroughly integrated, not by a political edict of man but because of the love of God. The Holy Spirit was doing something so deep and powerful that finally, color lines began to disappear and ethnic separatism was gone. People were moving in love just as on the Day of Pentecost. Not only were the various groups present in Acts 2 but Jews who had been scattered all over the world; there were also proselytes. These were peoples of other nations in Jerusalem with the Jewish people who had led them into worship of the one true God and they believed in the covenant of God. All ethnic groups were coming and what Micah had prophesied was coming to pass.

Micah 4:1(NKJV): *Now it shall come to pass in the latter days That the mountain of the Lord’s house Shall be established on the top of the mountains, And shall be exalted above the hills; And peoples shall flow to it.*

The word for “peoples” is “ethnos,” from where we get our word “ethnic (groups).”

The Holy Spirit was demonstrating by the miracle of language that He was reversing ethnic separatism.

This did not last long.

In Acts 6 there was a dispute between Greek widows and Jewish widows.

In Acts 15 there is a council meeting due to disagreement between some Jewish believers and Gentiles. The Church was primarily made up of Jews so God had to use a man He jerked off a horse and gave him a special assignment – “he will bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15).

What am I saying? God made clear at both Pentecost and Azusa Street, what He wanted to do, but neither lasted very long. It is on historical record that within six months, white churches began to call their people out. One thing that was said was, "It's not right that black hands should be laid on white heads to receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit" – as though God cared at all.

The tendency we have to take our cultural values and force them upon others in the kingdom of God kills what God wants to do.

Then, is there an answer? I know this. Wherever people humble themselves, God is pleased to move. If you're willing for it to start with you, say "Amen."

### **Personal Journey**

I shared with you previously both the negative and positive influences on a small boy, a son of the Deep South, raised during the legal days of Jim Crow where much around me was segregated. The influence of my Dad had more to do with me being able to say I was not prejudiced than anything. I want to share some significant steps in God's removal of wrong thinking and subterranean bias in my life; not to highlight how far along the journey I am in a spirit of superiority but to give you pictures so you might more easily recognize how the Lord may want to uncover things in your own life.

### Folklore of Genesis 9:18-27

The flood in Noah's day was more than high water; it changed the entire geological structure of earth. This incident took place immediately after the flood receded. It is the story of Noah's drunkenness, which happened because this was the first time the processes for fermentation of grapes was possible on earth. Noah didn't realize what could happen but he got drunk. When his son, Ham, entered the tent he looked upon his father's nakedness and told his brothers about it in a mocking way. They took this seriously and walked backwards into the tent and covered his nakedness without seeing it. When Noah awoke he realized what had taken place and cursed the descendants of Ham, the Canaanites. Verse 26 reads, "and may Canaan be his servant" in regards to his older brother, Shem.

Nobody sat me down and taught me this interpretation I'm about to tell you and I apologize for even repeating it. But it was common in this nation during the entire period of slavery. I did hear it spoken of as a possibility. What I'm referring to is a line of thinking that says the curse of Canaan is what created the black peoples and that's why they became a slave people. This is the text it's taken from. The Bible says nothing remotely close to that.

Number one: there's no reason to suppose the mention of Canaan has anything to do with pigmentation. It's not there.

Number two: this is a prophecy that has to do with why the Canaanites would one day become a cursed people. By the time Israel had come into the promised land, the Canaanites (descendants of Ham) had corrupted themselves to a high degree because of a curse bequeathed to them due to the

absence of respect toward a father. It was transmitted through both seed and influence of between 500-600 years until the corruption and decay had intensified so that they became an idolatrous people with every form of abomination.

The clarity of my thinking that this has nothing to do with the sovereignty of God placing peoples with dark pigmentation and assigning them to slave-hood came to me sometime in my youth. It just didn't ring true to me.

#### Inter-ethnic Marriage-Phase One

The second point on my journey also had to do with my thinking. By 1978, I entered Bible school for my second year of learning. I had never in my 22 years yet seen an inter-ethnic couple that were black/white. You didn't see that in the Deep South. I've spoken about my friendship and interaction with blacks but my thinking didn't extend to black/white marriage. But when I saw a handsome but black male and a very white, blond female dating and holding hands, I realized I was very disposed culturally to think inter-ethnic marriage was wrong.

The school leadership addressed this. They said biblically there is nothing wrong with black/white marriage but due to the entrenchment of traditions, family feelings and the possibility of extreme family stresses, it would be wise to move very, very slow.

I felt that to be a fairly balanced, unprejudiced and enlightened view, for the first time I'd ever heard any commentary on it. I had the feeling that now that it's been dealt with I can move on because this is probably one of the only inter-ethnic couples I'll come in contact with. And, after graduation I won't see them any longer.

#### Inter-ethnic Marriage-Phase Two

But my learning continued. About 1980 I was in the car with a now well-known minister and this issue had been turning over and over in my mind. I realized that I had such a deep reservation that if push came to shove I'd probably say, "That ought not to happen." But riding in the car that day, I asked this minister what they thought about black/white marriage. Besides being very clear, the answer was without hesitation and what was most disturbing to me was how matter-of-factly they said, "The Bible does not condemn it at all." The spirit that accompanied the statement was minus the cautionary tone I'd heard a few years earlier. That's all that was said and I asked for no further comment. But at that moment the Holy Spirit revealed to me the condemning attitude I had about it and I felt the sweet release only He can give. It was settled.

#### Inter-ethnic Marriage-Phase Three

Then it was October 1993 as I heard Pastor Jack Hayford discuss this that he filled in some blanks for me when he said, in most nations of the world people marry inter-ethnically and think nothing of it. By this time, I'd traveled internationally and had seen that. Check.

He then said that his saying that is not revolutionary except on the North American continent because it is such an issue here. He went on to say that two people should just be able to meet,

connect and have the liberty to fall in love under the providence of God, regardless of skin color. He said that space needs to be given for that possibility.

Now he made the point and I will too, that I'm not pushing for inter-ethnic marriage. You don't marry someone of another color to prove that you're not prejudiced. You marry someone because of genuine affection and love for them.

### The Unveiling Post LA Riots/Rodney King

As I watched the April/May 1992 riots in Los Angeles on television, something came out that I did not even recognize as ethnic bias because it was so deeply imbedded as a result of my enculturation. I watched blacks destroying black businesses and neighborhoods and said, "They are crazy destroying their own neighborhoods." But I also distinctly remember this unspoken attitude – and this is the depth of which I'm talking about that is in us and we don't even know it. I didn't say this with my mouth but I distinctly remember thinking - *only blacks would do that*.

I didn't recognize that as being bias, prejudiced or prideful until six months later. Six months later God was able to speak through the blindness or the blockage that I had. It took place as I sat in a minister's meeting and the white minister shared how he also had a similar attitude until a dear friend of his, a black minister, shared with him something that opened his eyes: *If a member of your family tried to commit suicide and you didn't realize how pained they were, you wouldn't stand there shaking your fist at them and ask, 'What are you doing this to yourself for?' You would kneel beside them and say, "I didn't realize you hurt this much."* The white minister admitted to us that day that the pain of the black community *was more than he could understand*.

When he said that my eyes welled up with tears, I heard God speak to my heart about the attitude I had and I repented of this subterranean sin, this bias that was deeply embedded in my soul that didn't see the depth of pain the black community felt due to repeated injustices.

### **Final Word**

But here's a warning. Each of us need to come to terms with the fact that if we are afraid of getting too close with someone of another color, we should examine our heart to discover why. Is it due to subterranean prejudice? Only God can reveal that.

It's the fleshly nature of humans that either stands against it or insists upon it. That's trying to force human thought and energy into God's kingdom and that's not how God's kingdom works.

You begin by recognizing things in you that previously was unrecognized and allow the Lord to unveil, uncover and remove from you.