

CROSSING THE COLOR LINE:
THE CHURCH OF GOD IN CHRIST, THE ASSEMBLIES OF GOD AND THE CIVIL
RIGHTS MOVEMENT

by

Blaine Charles Hamilton

Bachelor of Arts, 2003
Lee University
Cleveland, TN

Masters of Theological Studies
Southern Methodist University
Dallas, TX

Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the
Brite Divinity School

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Theology in History and Theology

Fort Worth, TX

April 2008

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April 4, 2008 marked the fortieth anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the world-renowned leader of the struggle for African-American civil rights in the 1950s and 60s. His final speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," was delivered the night before in the historic Mason Temple in Memphis, TN. Mason Temple, the mother church to the largest African-American Pentecostal denomination, the Church of God in Christ, had taken on a central role in the sanitation workers' strike which was underway in Memphis. Mason Temple had been the sight of marches and rallies as well as police intimidation.¹ This was perhaps the most significant moment at which the Pentecostal movement merged with the civil rights movement. Despite their African-American heritage and interracial foundations, the Pentecostal movement, including most of its predominately African-American denominations, remained largely silent in response to the cries of civil rights demonstrators across the nation. The purpose of this work is to investigate the interracial heritage of Pentecostalism and its subsequent silence with regard to the civil rights movement. Major attention will be given to the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) and Assemblies of God (A/G), the largest black and white Pentecostal denominations respectively. The history of these two groups will offer some insights into the history of racial division within Pentecostalism as well as the differing responses of African American and white Pentecostals to the emerging civil rights movement. After a brief prolegomena, the essay will turn to the early history of the two movements and then a particular focus on each movement and each one's specific responses to the growing racial tensions in America.

¹ See Joan Turner Beifuss, *At the River I Stand: Memphis, the 1968 Strike, and Martin Luther King* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1989) and Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007).

PROLEGOMENA

Before embarking on the historical narrative, it is important to set the context for this study amongst the multitude of studies regarding the civil rights movement. Recent studies of the civil rights movement and the struggle for freedom within the African-American community have investigated the role of religion amongst the movement's leaders and grassroots' protestors. Most notably, is the work of David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope*. Chappell investigates the failure of both white liberals in achieving civil liberties and white conservatives in gaining the support of the white church leadership as well as the success of the civil rights movement within the African-American community. He claims, "The black movement's nonviolent soldiers were driven not by modern liberal faith in human reason, but older, seemingly more durable prejudices and superstitions that were rooted in Christian and Jewish myth."² The leaders of the civil rights movement were able to engage the wealth of the black church tradition and form a purpose for their efforts out of those canons, rather than the typical arguments extant within Protestant liberalism. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr., although personally and academically reflective of Reinhold Niebuhr and Walter Rauschenbusch, publicly appealed to the Christian scriptures and the traditions of African-American faith. Chappell claims, "Ostensibly religious movements have political dimensions that deserve the attention they have received in recent years. But the converse is also true. Ostensibly political movements have religious dimensions that deserve equal attention."³ There was certainly a revival-like atmosphere which pervaded the meetings of civil rights activists (an atmosphere which will be reflected in the sanitation workers' rallies held at Mason Temple in 1968). According to Chappell, "the words of many participants [in the civil rights movement] suggest that it was, for them, primarily a religious

² David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 102.

event, whose social and political aspects were, in their minds, secondary or incidental.”⁴ The civil rights “revivals” demonstrated various characteristics which are reflective of religious revivals, including evangelism, miracles, conversions and altar calls. These religious revivals were reflective of both the religious movements across America (i.e. the Great Awakening, the Revival in the West, the Holiness and Pentecostal movements, etc.) as well as the social movements which had changed the American political landscape (i.e. abolitionism, suffrage, etc.) during the previous two centuries.

While the African-American community was able to mine a wealth of resources from within their own tradition, including both religious practices and leadership, the white opposition could not muster much support from their religious leaders. During the antebellum struggle over slavery, white churches in the South were staunch proponents of the “Southern” way of life which led to numerous church splits between North and South, some of which are still in existence today (i.e., Northern and Southern Baptists). White pastors all across the South were adamant supporters of the institution of slavery, preaching racial hatred and white supremacy from their pulpits weekly. However, against the approaching tide of the civil rights movement the racist levies of the white church failed to hold. According to Chappell, “The [white] churches failed to elevate their whiteness – the institutions and customs that oppressed black folk – above their other concerns ... They could not make defense of segregation the unifying principle of their culture.”⁵ Conservative white Christian leaders could not reproduce in their white churches the same fervor and zeal which the African-American community developed in response to the civil rights movement. This lack of unity with regard to segregation will be clear in the discussions amongst Assemblies of God presbyters in the 1950s and 60s. While

⁴ Ibid., 87.

⁵ Ibid., 107.

Chappell's work brings the history of the civil rights movement into a discussion regarding the role of religion in the movement, he does not offer much detailed analysis of the ways in which particular denominations or branches of Christianity engaged the civil rights struggle differently. Thus, his work is largely guided by the actions of African-American Baptists and Methodists, while Pentecostals and other Sanctified churches go unnoticed.⁶

Paul Harvey's recent work, *Freedom's Coming*, begins to fill the gap left by Chappell's research. Harvey investigates occasions for "racial interchange" in the South leading up to the civil rights movement. For him, "'Racial interchange' refers to the exchange of southern religious cultures between white and black believers in expressive culture, seen especially in music, in the formation of new religious traditions, and in lived experience."⁷ Unlike Chappell, who investigated the relationship between religion and race generally, Harvey investigates the role of race within a particular tradition, Pentecostalism. While not originating in the South, Pentecostalism "attracted white and black evangelicals who were disaffected by the embourgeoisement of the region's dominant religious institutions."⁸ According to Harvey, "In contrast to the biracial work [of the institutional churches] in the public sphere ... racial interchange in religious expression involved cultural interaction in more private spaces of religious experience."⁹ These private spaces were often found in the interracial worship and prayer services of early 20th century Pentecostals, the most notable example being the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles. Harvey recognizes, "Established evangelicals scorned the

⁶ The "Sanctified church" is an inclusive term which has been applied to the segment of the black church experience outside of the Baptist and Methodist denominations, which includes both holiness, Pentecostal and charismatic groups as well as various independent black congregations all of which emphasize forms of personal and communal holiness and sanctification. See Cheryl J. Sanders, *Saints in Exile: the Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996) as well as the work of Zora Neale Hurston, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes and Anthea Butler.

⁷ Paul Harvey, *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

Holiness [and Pentecostal] sects in part for their theology, and even more so because of the class of people they attracted – lower-class whites, factory workers, ordinary black laborers.”¹⁰ The racial intermingling and religious enthusiasm was embarrassing to institutional Christianity which was attempting to proselytize America with their middle-class values. In addition to their persecution within Christianity, Pentecostals were also harassed by concerned citizens of their communities. “The biracial mingling in early Holiness and Pentecostalism sometimes agitated locals who perceived the services as potential harbingers of social equality,” according to Harvey.¹¹ One such occasion was reported by F. F. Bosworth in a letter to his mother in 1911:

At, the annual State Encampment (Pentecostal) of the Col[ored] people at Hearne, the Col[ored] people built a brush arbor, (continuing from the end of their tent) to accommodate the white people of Hearne who wanted to attend the camp meeting. This full gospel had never been preached to the white people at Hearne and besides filling this brush arbor, automobiles and carriages and many white people standing surrounded the tent to listen to the preaching and testimonies of the Col[ored] people. Many of the white citizens became deeply interested in the teaching and not wanting to seek the Baptism at a colored altar. The white people urged the Col[ored] leaders to send for some white Pentecostal teacher to come and help them into the Baptism. And so to accommodate these white citizens, I was sent for and of course went, to the campground and on Saturday night preached to two large audiences, one white and one black ... As I was on my way to spend the night with another white preacher who had also come that day we were attacked by several roughs, one of whom had a revolver with which (as he and the others cursed us for coming there as they said to put them on a level with the d- niggers) they seemed determined to shoot us both down at once ...

... [As] I was waiting for my train, a larger mob of about 25 took me from the depot and knocked me down and pounded me with heavy hardwood clubs with all their power, cursing and declaring that I would never preach again when they were through with me. As they pounded me with these heavy clubs (made from the oar of a boat), I offered no resistance, but committed myself to God and asked him not to let the blows break my spine. God stood wonderfully by me and no bones were broken except a slight fracture in my left wrist. When they left off pounding me with the clubs as I got up others of the mob who had no clubs knocked me down hitting me in the head with their fists. I was knocked down several times but was not for a moment unconscious, which was a miracle of God’s care ...

¹⁰ Ibid., 129.

¹¹ Ibid., 130.

... You need not worry one bit for we are not now preaching to Col[ored] People and will not unless God clearly leads as he did when he led us to Queen City and other parts of Dallas.¹²

Along with the violent, coercive pressure which Bosworth experienced and more subtle propaganda, white Pentecostals were discouraged by other white believers and local citizens from their religious interactions with African Americans. As time progressed, “White Pentecostals gradually dissociated themselves from the racial interchange of their earlier origins. The early biracial Pentecostal services produced some genuine sentiments of Christian interracialism, but by the 1920s black and white believers had settled into racially distinct and separate organizations.”¹³ However, the confrontation of the civil rights movement would bring their common interracial heritage to the surface.

Gayraud S. Wilmore, noted historian of African-American religion, has observed, “No serious history of Christianity in America can be written in the future without including a full discussion of the influence of William J. Seymour’s brand of Pentecostalism after 1906 upon the white Church and the concentric waves which spread out from Azusa street to carry Martin Luther King, Jr., to the Mason Temple C.O.G.I.C. and that garbage workers’ strike that fateful spring of 1968.”¹⁴ Unfortunately, Wilmore’s “serious history” has yet to be written. Several works within Pentecostal history have investigated the interracial heritage of Pentecostalism and the subsequent rise of racially divided denominations; however, few have carried this research forward into the era of the civil rights movement. Some work has been done with regard to the Assemblies of God, most notably Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., “Historical Roots of Racial Unity and Division within American Pentecostalism,” and Joe Newman, *Race and the Assemblies of God*

¹² F. F. Bosworth, “Beating in Texas Follows Ministry to Blacks: F. F. Bosworth’s 1911 Letter to his Mother” *Assemblies of God Heritage* (1 June 1986): 5, 14.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁴ Gayraud Wilmore, “Reinterpretation in Black Church History,” *Chicago Theological Seminary Register* (Wint 1983): 34.

Church. However, little to no work has been done to investigate the involvement of Church of God in Christ bishops or laypeople in the civil rights movement, leaving many to conclude that Dr. King's speech at Mason Temple in 1968 was merely a fluke. Yet, there is some evidence within more recent works on the Memphis sanitation workers' strike, especially Michael K. Honey's *Going Down Jericho Road*, that Mason Temple and COGIC were more heavily involved than has been previously noted. Regardless, no effort has been made to tell the stories of these two movements in conjunction with regard to the role which race played in dividing them and which the civil rights movement played in uniting them.

RACE AND AZUSA STREET

While much recent scholarship has attended to the global beginnings of Pentecostalism,¹⁵ the history of Pentecostalism, at least in North America, is most often traced to two men and one peculiar revival. In the late 19th century, Charles Parham established a healing home and bible school in the town of Topeka, KS. With much millennial expectation and a close reading of Acts, he and his students engaged in an all-night prayer meeting on December 31, 1900. It was at this prayer meeting that Agnes Ozman, a young, female student of Parham's, was baptized in the Holy Ghost. Parham and those present believed Ozman's speech was actually fluent Chinese which would assist her in the urgent need for missionaries across the globe.¹⁶ He began to spread news of this outpouring, eventually establishing another bible school in Houston, TX. Here, along with other holiness and Pentecostal students, William Seymour first encountered the ideas of Pentecostalism and the doctrine of Spirit Baptism.¹⁷

¹⁵ For a more detailed description of these efforts see, Dale T. Irvin, "Pentecostal Historiography and Global Christianity: Rethinking the Question of Origins" *Pneuma* 27 (Spr 2005): 35-50.

¹⁶ Gary McGee, *People of the Spirit: The Assemblies of God* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2004), 55. Along with speaking Chinese (xenolalia), Ozman believed she could write in Chinese (xenographia) as well. A photo of Ozman's writing is included in McGee's text.

¹⁷ For a detailed biography of Parham, see James R. Goff, *Fields White Unto Harvest: Charles F. Parham and the Missionary Origins of Pentecostalism* (Fayetteville, AK: University of Arkansas Press, 1988).

Born in Louisiana, Seymour had been living in the Midwest until 1903 when he came to Houston.¹⁸ After holding some revival meetings in the area and traveling to Jackson, MS (likely to meet Charles Price Jones, an early associate of Charles Harrison Mason and founder of COGIC) Seymour heard of Parham's bible school in Houston. Upholding the Jim Crow laws of the South, Parham allowed Seymour to sit in the hallway and listen to the lectures through the door in order to remain segregated from the other white students. In 1906, Seymour was invited to pastor a small black holiness congregation in Los Angeles, CA. Upon arrival Seymour began preaching Parham's doctrine of Spirit baptism and he was summarily locked out of the church. However, after gaining momentum at the home of a local couple on Bonnie Brae Street, Seymour moved the revival into an abandoned stable and former African Methodist Episcopal church on Azusa Street. The revival quickly gained a following and free (albeit negative) publicity from the *Los Angeles Times*. According to participants, as well as the *Times* reporters, black and white, Hispanic and Asian, male and female, all worshipped together in Azusa Street without regard for societal norms.¹⁹ With both the newspaper publicity and the work of their own paper, *Apostolic Faith*, news of the revival spread around the country and the world with numerous pastors and missionaries traveling to Los Angeles to attend the meetings.

Several notable ministers attended the Azusa revival, carrying the message of Pentecost back to their home churches. Charles Harrison Mason, a holiness preacher from Mississippi, attended the revival in 1906, staying for five weeks to learn from Seymour. Mason had joined with Charles Price Jones in 1897 to form the Church of God in Christ, a black holiness denomination. Upon his return from Azusa, Mason and Jones split and their followers divided –

¹⁸ For a biography of Seymour, see Larry E. Martin, *The Life and Ministry of William J. Seymour: and a History of the Azusa Street Revival* (Joplin, MO: Christian Life Books, 1999).

¹⁹ See Frank Bartleman, *Azusa Street: The Roots of Modern-day Pentecost* (Gainesville, FL: Bridge-Logos, 1980) and "Weird Babel of Tongues" *Los Angeles Times* (18 April 1906): 1.

the Pentecostals followed Mason and retained the COGIC name while the rest joined Jones in the newly-formed Church of God in Christ (Holiness). Among the other ministers traveling to Azusa Street was Gaston Barnabas Cashwell. Cashwell had left the Methodist church to join a group of holiness believers in North Carolina. After hearing about the Azusa revival, he traveled to Los Angeles to see for himself. According to Vinson Synan, “On first seeking for the baptism in the Holy Spirit, he was antagonized by his aversion to being prayed for by blacks. He went to his hotel room, where he “suffered a crucifixion” and “died to many things,” including his racial prejudice. He went the next night requesting that Seymour and other blacks lay hands on him. He promptly received the pentecostal experience.”²⁰ Not only was the revival inter-racial in character, but it also led many to confront their inherent prejudices. Cashwell would return from Azusa spreading the Pentecostal message to the Pentecostal Holiness Church in North Carolina, the Church of God in Cleveland, TN and most notably some future leaders of the Assemblies of God, M. M. Pinson and H. G. Rodgers.²¹

Unlike Cashwell, the interracial worship at Azusa was not always well-received by white participants. According to Iain MacRobert, “In October 1906, Parham traveled to Los Angeles having received a letter from Seymour and reports from friends who were critical of black influence at the Azusa Mission.”²² When Parham witnessed the interracial mixing and African-style worship, he was repulsed. He attempted to wrest control of the revival from Seymour but the congregation refused him. Parham espoused a view known as Anglo-Israelism, which identified the British throne with the throne of David and claimed “that only those physically

²⁰ Vinson Synan, “Cashwell, Gaston Barnabas,” in *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, ed. Stanley M. Burgess (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 457.

²¹ Conflicting reports cite this encounter in either Birmingham, AL (Synan, “Cashwell,” 457) or Memphis, TN. Cordas C. Burnett claims that Pinson and Rodgers attended one of Cashwell’s revivals in Memphis which had been orchestrated by L. P. Adams, a later associate of Mason in COGIC. See Cordas C. Burnett, “Forty Years Ago,” *Pentecostal Evangel* (28 March 1954): 12.

²² Iain MacRobert, *The Black Roots and White Racism of Early Pentecostalism in the USA* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), 60.

descended from Abraham (whom he identifies as the Aryan race) could belong to the Bride of Christ.”²³ Throughout his life he continued to espouse hatred of the ministry at Azusa Street, despite the fact that it had spread many of his doctrinal innovations. Allan Anderson claims, “We can only conclude that even though he may have been “Softer” on race issues than some of his white Southern contemporaries (even this is debatable), yet like them, Parham was essentially a racial bigot and white supremacist from the beginning. It is also significant, if not surprising, that there was no stronger reaction to his extreme views from other Pentecostals at the time, that is, if they were aware of them.”²⁴

Aside from Parham’s racist views, other leaders challenged the interracial character of Azusa Street leading many white congregants into other churches. In 1911, during Seymour’s short preaching tour, William H. Durham held revival meetings at the Azusa Mission espousing the Finished Work doctrine, which claimed that sanctification was not a second work of grace after regeneration but included in salvation. Thus, Spirit baptism was a gift of the Spirit bestowed upon believers who had experienced the “finished work” of Christ on the cross. When Seymour returned, he confronted Durham and rejected his doctrinal innovation. MacRobert claims, “While Seymour consistently sought for a multi-racial movement, Durham rejected him and formed a movement dominated by whites.” Although Durham died of pulmonary tuberculosis shortly thereafter, his followers, predominately white Pentecostals, split from Seymour’s Azusa mission over the Finished Work doctrine. Other Pentecostals would pick up Durham’s ideology and perpetuate the idea through their denominations. In the Assemblies of God, Durham’s influence is most clearly evident in that Eudorus N. Bell, who had traveled to Chicago to learn the Pentecostal doctrines from Durham, was the first general chairman of the

²³Allan Anderson, “The Dubious Legacy of Charles Parham: Racism and Cultural Insensitivities among Pentecostals,” *Pneuma* 27.1 (Spr 2005): 52-53.

²⁴ Anderson, “The Dubious Legacy of Charles Parham,” 55.

Assemblies. Burned by numerous white Pentecostal leaders, in 1914, Seymour changed the articles of incorporation for the Azusa Street mission to stipulate that black men and women would be the leaders and major benefactors of the ministry. According to MacRobert, “Seymour continued to believe that all races should be united by their common faith in Christ and shared experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, but his treatment at the hands of many white Pentecostals led him to ensure that Azusa was not taken over by those who would once again keep the black man outside the door and bar him from the altar.”²⁵

RACE AFTER AZUSA STREET

As the Pentecostal message spread from Los Angeles across the Midwest and South numerous ministers, now ostracized from their evangelical churches, were forced to cooperate together. One such group, the Apostolic Faith Movement, was organized in Orchard, TX in 1906 under the leadership of Howard A. Goss, W. F. Carothers, Arch P. Collins and Eudorus N. Bell. Goss had been convinced of the Pentecostal message as a high school student by Parham in Galena, KS. He quickly began to work with Parham traveling to towns across Texas and Arkansas, preaching the Pentecostal message. E. N. Bell, as noted above, was a student of William Durham, who pastored a church in Fort Worth, TX. Bell published and distributed a newspaper, *The Apostolic Faith*, detailing the group’s activities and helping to spread the Pentecostal message across the Midwest and South. Another group, which had been founded by M. M. Pinson and H. G. Rodgers in Alabama, published their own newspaper, *Word and Witness*. In 1913, the two groups, under the leadership of Bell and Pinson, decided to join together under the name “Church of God in Christ.”²⁶ The following year, in 1914, Goss, Bell and Pinson would call for anyone interested in common affiliation to join them in Hot Springs, AK in order

²⁵ MacRobert, *The Black Roots and White Racism of Early Pentecostalism*, 68.

²⁶ Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 154.

to consolidate and better organize their Pentecostal efforts. The result of this meeting would be the first General Council of the Assemblies of God.

The early founders' use of the name "Church of God in Christ" has sparked considerable controversy in recent scholarship regarding the nature of the relationship between the A/G and COGIC. A majority of the scholarship regarding this early period claims that Goss had sought permission from Charles H. Mason, founder of COGIC, to use the name "Church of God in Christ" and ordain ministers into the organization for the purpose of obtaining discounted railway passes. The earliest record of this account seems to be a section of an unpublished paper which J. Roswell Flower was preparing on the "History of the Assemblies of God" in 1950. In this text, Flower claims, "In the latter part of 1907, H. A. Goss had gone to Arkansas where he met Elder C. H. Mason, the General Overseer of the Newly organized Church of God in Christ. Brother Goss accepted the courtesies of that organization and was issued credentials, which were recognized by the southern railroads. With the consent of Elder Mason, a white organization was formed, using the name "Church of God in Christ" and credentials were issued to E. N. Bell and a few other ministers."²⁷ One short passage in Goss' autobiography, *The Winds of God*, seems to support Flower's account, but lacks any reference to Mason specifically: "For some years now we had had no organization beyond that of a "gentleman's agreement," which included an understanding that we would withdraw our fellowship from the untrustworthy. There was, however, an association of ministers called the "Church of God in Christ," to which a few of us belonged from 1910 until 1914. This association was primarily for business purposes."²⁸ Goss gives no further details about the name "Church of God in Christ" and does not mention any

²⁷ J. Roswell Flower, "History of the Assemblies of God" (unpublished paper prepared for instructional purposes at Central Bible Institute, Springfield, MO, ca. 1950), Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, MO.

²⁸ Ethel E. Goss, *The Winds of God: the story of the early Pentecostal movement (1901-1914) in the life of Howard A. Goss*, revised ed. (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1998), 258.

meeting with Mason. His personal diaries and calendars do not provide any notation regarding a meeting with Mason; however, he does mention meeting with L. P. Adams, a white minister associated with Mason, in Memphis, TN.²⁹ According to Assemblies of God archivists no credential records have been found among Assemblies' ministers with Mason's signature, including Goss' credentials.³⁰ Despite this lack of solid evidence regarding the organizational connections between Mason's COGIC and the early leaders of the Assemblies of God, the story of Goss and other white Assemblies' ministers connections with Mason have been perpetuated in the scholarship ad nauseam.

Early on the idea of a connection between COGIC and the Assemblies was made by Carl Brumback in his early history of the Assemblies of God, *Suddenly from Heaven*.³¹ William Menzies, in his critical history *Anointed to Serve*, repeated Brumback and Flower's assertions regarding Goss' connection with Mason. However, Menzies cited Goss' autobiography as the source for his research although Goss (cited above) does not mention Mason in his account, only the name "Church of God in Christ."³² Other, more recent scholarship has continued to perpetuate the idea of a connection between Mason and Goss, including Vinson Synan³³ and Cecil Robeck.³⁴ A number of COGIC scholars have also lent credence to the idea, namely, Ithiel

²⁹ See Darrin Rodgers, "The Assemblies of God and the Long Journey toward Racial Reconciliation" *Assemblies of God Heritage* (2008): 61 (footnote 44).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

³¹ Carl Brumback, *Suddenly from Heaven: A History of the Assemblies of God* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1961), 154.

³² William Menzies, *Anointed to Serve: The Story of the Assemblies of God* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1971), 82.

³³ Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1971), 151-52. In his updated version Synan repeats the story with no additional footnote or corroboration, other than the previously mentioned histories. See Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition* (1997), 153-54.

³⁴ Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., "Historical Roots of Racial Unity and Division in American Pentecostalism," Oct 1994, p. 23ff, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, MO.

Clemmons,³⁵ David Daniels,³⁶ and Anthea Butler.³⁷ The prevailing winds of this scholarship are evident in the recently published *Race and the Assemblies of God Church* by Joe Newman. Newman, a pastor in Memphis and graduate of the University of Memphis, relying on much of the aforementioned scholarship, concludes, “The Hot Springs conference was the watershed event that split Pentecostalism into a racially divided movement ... At that moment, Pentecostalism succumbed to the fate of earlier American religious movements as segregation became institutionalized.”³⁸

So far, the sole scholar swimming against the tide is Darrin Rodgers, Director of the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center in Springfield, MO, an archive for the Assemblies of God and Pentecostalism generally.³⁹ In a recent article, “The Assemblies of God and the Long Journey toward Racial Reconciliation,” Rodgers claims, “There is little, if any, evidence known to exist that suggests that Mason and the founders of the Assemblies of God were once part of the same organization. Instead, they were members of different organizations both using the same name.”⁴⁰ Rodgers finds no archival evidence for the formal connections between Goss or any other Assemblies’ ministers and COGIC. He argues, “Very little, if any, evidence has been found that demonstrates an organic connection between Mason’s organization and the [white]

³⁵ Ithiel C. Clemmons, *Bishop C. H. Mason and the Roots of the Church of God in Christ* (Lanham, MD: Pneuma Life Publishing, 1996), 70. Clemmons claims, citing Synan, that all 350 ministers who formed the A/G were originally ordained by Mason.

³⁶ See David Daniels, “Charles Harrison Mason: The Interracial Impulse of Early Pentecostalism,” in *Portraits of a Generation: Early Pentecostal Leaders* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2002).

³⁷ Anthea Butler, “Walls of Division: Racism’s Role in Pentecostal History,” in *Papers of the 24th Annual Meeting of the Society of Pentecostal Studies in Wheaton, IL, November 10-12, 1994*, by the Society of Pentecostal Studies (Society of Pentecostal Studies, 2002), 10ff.

³⁸ Joe Newman, *Race and the Assemblies of God Church: The Journey from Azusa Street to the “Miracle of Memphis”* (Youngstown, NY: Cambria Press, 2007), 68-69.

³⁹ Rodgers claims support from an M.A. thesis by Erik J. Hjalmeby, “A Rhetorical History of Race Relations in the Early Pentecostal Movement, 1906-1916” (M.A. Thesis, Baylor University, 2007); however, Hjalmeby’s thesis repeats many of the same assumptions cited above with regard to Goss’ connection with Mason (125ff). He does question the rhetorical significance of race in the founding of the A/G, citing the leaders’ emphasis on unity and love in order to illicit support from the attendees (132ff).

⁴⁰ Rodgers, “The Assemblies of God and the Long Journey toward Racial Reconciliation,” 54.

Church of God in Christ. The leaders of the [white] Church of God in Christ did have great respect for Bishop Mason, but this relationship seems to have been informal.”⁴¹ While Rodgers hopes for further archival evidence to be uncovered (especially in the records of the railroad Clergy Bureau), he cannot assert more than loose ties between Mason and the early leaders of the Assemblies of God.

Despite the questions regarding organizational unity between black and white Pentecostals in the early 20th century, one thing is certain – Mason attended the first General Council of the Assemblies of God and granted his blessing to the organization. According to Clemmons, “Mason traveled to Hot Springs, Arkansas, to attend the organizing meeting of the Assemblies of God ... [accompanied by] the “Saints Industrial,” singers from Lexington, Mississippi. Mason bid the white leaders a warm farewell and gave them leave to void their Church of God in Christ credentials in order to switch to those of their new denomination.”⁴² While Clemmons reference to voiding credentials cannot be corroborated, all the Pentecostal histories agree that Mason attended the Hot Springs meeting in support of the emerging Assemblies of God. Robert Anderson comments, “The independent course taken by the whites was by mutual consent ... no hostility, racial or other, seems to have been involved [in the founding of the Assemblies of God], since Bishop Mason addressed that organizing meeting and gave his blessing to the new denomination.”⁴³ Being a well-known and well-respected Pentecostal church leader and evangelist, Bishop Mason’s endorsement of the first General Assembly lent credibility and stature to the Hot Springs meeting. While the environment may not have been hostile, the new organization was establishing a pattern of racial segregation

⁴¹ Ibid., 57.

⁴² Clemmons, *Mason and the Roots of COGIC*, 71.

⁴³ Robert M. Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1979), 189.

which would be repeated nationally throughout the Pentecostal movement. “The Pentecostals proved unable to resist the xenophobic impulses of the 1920’s,” according to Anderson.⁴⁴ That the founders of the Assemblies of God were unwilling to consider a more formal relationship with Mason, despite their concerns for unity and organization, signals their aversion to a multiracial fellowship. Grant Wacker observes, “No one should be surprised. Pentecostals were, after all, normal American Christians, subject to all the prejudices and confusions that afflicted most normal American Christians. Pragmatic accommodation to the mores of the age was a survival strategy, not a certificate of moral purity.”⁴⁵

While Mason’s presence at the first General Council demonstrates a familiarity between white and black Pentecostals, the establishment of a separate denomination for whites reinforced the *de facto* segregation of American culture. This implicit segregation was later reinforced by the A/G leadership. In 1915, W. F. Carothers, an early founder of the Assemblies and long time associate of Parham and Goss, published an article in the *Pentecostal Evangel* entitled “Attitude of Pentecostal Whites to the Colored Brethren in the South.” Carothers claimed, “[God’s] purpose to preserve the racial purity and integrity of the different nations he had made is plainly indicated by His appointment of the bounds of their habitation. Nor would there ever be any “race question” if men would but observe the divine arrangement and live, each nation in his own country, even as each family should live in its own separate home.” He realized that African Americans had not violated “the bounds of their habitation” intentionally but “the white man, for selfish purposes, imported” African slaves onto the American continent. However, now that such a mixing of the races existed, Carothers claimed, “the Holy Spirit also, in a final effort to preserve the integrity of the races, has intensified the racial impulse. This latter is not

⁴⁴ Ibid., 190.

⁴⁵ Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 235.

prejudice nor any other evil intent whatsoever, but merely the Lord's own substitute for wholesome geographical bounds of separation between the races." Carothers compared racial separation to the similar divisions which exist between the sexes. He concludes the article by addressing Northern Pentecostals: "Let our Northern brethren be assured that the Pentecostal people of the South, while conforming cheerfully to the generally wholesome regulations made necessary in the South, have not the slightest prejudice or lack of divine love for the colored people, not is there any lack of mutual interest in the work they are doing and in their spiritual welfare. They generally get along better with the Lord than we do."⁴⁶ Carothers' divine endorsement of racial segregation demonstrates the status quo tendencies of the Assemblies of God which reinforced the racial division between the A/G and COGIC. Almost a century would pass before any heartfelt reconciliation was attempted.

THE CHURCH OF GOD IN CHRIST

With the separation of its white counterparts who joined the Assemblies of God, the Church of God in Christ turned toward the black community, forging a space for African Americans to find encouragement and peace amidst a culture which despised them. Gayraud Wilmore has observed, "One of the continuing paradoxes of the Black church as the custodian of a great portion of Black culture and religion is that it is at once the most reactionary and the most radical of Black institutions, the most imbued with the mythology and values of white America, and yet the most proud, the most independent and indigenous collectivity of the Black community."⁴⁷ Nowhere was this truer than within the COGIC churches. MacRobert claims, "With the redrawing of the colour line by the white Pentecostals, the black worshipping community became an ethnic community, as it had been in Africa and during slavery. There the

⁴⁶ W. F. Carothers, "Attitude of Pentecostal Whites to the Colored Brethren in the South," *Pentecostal Evangel* (14 Aug 1915): 2.

⁴⁷ Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), xiii.

black person in a racist society could have his humanity and dignity affirmed. There he could find an outlet for the self expression, creativity and diverse abilities which were stifled by white society.”⁴⁸

Unlike other factions within the black church which sought to eliminate traditional African religious practices, Mason saw COGIC as a movement which could encourage and integrate traditional African religious practices into Christian worship. According to Clemmons, “[Mason] believed that as blacks clamored for acceptance by whites and assimilation into the American cultural mainstream, they risked losing a spiritual treasure – the power of religious experience.”⁴⁹ Thus, Mason “conflicted with other black Christians over whether or not to retain traditional slave religious practices, especially the holy dance, an out growth of the ring shout ... Mason mounted a militant defense of these ecstatic practices battling to retain and preserve a cultural tradition and expression as much as to preserve a theological perspective on biblical grounds.”⁵⁰ These African worship styles, while dismissed by other African-American churches and white Pentecostalism, were instilled within the core of COGIC churches.

Encouraged by Mason, COGIC missionaries followed the migration of African Americans from the South to the Northern cities planting churches which retained these traditional practices. Hans Baer and Merrill Singer have studied the phenomenon of the rural “storefront” church within urban communities. They argue, “The rural church was the “sentimental model” that the [urban] migrants hoped to participate in when they attended the large mainstream congregations in the cities of the North and South. Since they often felt marginal in the stratified mainstream congregations, a significant number of these lower-class migrants attempted to recreate the ethos of the rural church in storefronts and converted

⁴⁸ MacRobert, *The Black Roots and White Racism of Early Pentecostalism*, 94.

⁴⁹ Clemmons, *Mason and the Roots of COGIC*, 17.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

residential buildings.”⁵¹ Initially many whites were also attracted to these vibrant Pentecostal churches; however, as white Pentecostal churches were established in the same areas, many white members left COGIC churches, leaving them predominately African-American congregations.⁵² Other African Americans, migrating to the North, were drawn to these ethnic communities. Baer and Singer note:

The older Baptist and Methodist churches in the African-American community simply did not have the resources necessary to meet the material needs of overwhelming numbers of poor migrants. Furthermore, many migrants who had enjoyed positions of leadership and responsibility in rural churches found themselves relegated to the sidelines of the large urban congregations. In addition to seeming more bureaucratic, impersonal, formal, and sedate than their counterparts in the South, the established congregations increasingly adapted themselves to the more secular concerns of a new Black middle class. Lower-class migrants frequently found they were viewed with disdain by their more affluent northern-born communicants and threatened by their sophistication.⁵³

These COGIC churches were filling a niche within their urban communities. However, they would not remain “storefront” churches for long. According to Robert Franklin, “Through its practices, the denomination proclaimed a gospel of *empowerment through the acquisition of economic goods* such as land, property, and wealth ... The denomination sought to empower poor black people by encouraging them to move from those modest buildings [they currently occupied] into the impressive cathedrals and synagogues coming available due to white suburban flight.”⁵⁴ In Memphis, the denomination undertook an enormous building project during World

⁵¹ Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer, *African-American Religion in the Twentieth Century: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 28.

⁵² Clemmons, *Mason and the Roots of COGIC*, cites two occasions as examples of this phenomenon: Mother Johnson planting in Michigan (85ff) and a COGIC congregation in Los Angeles which was adversely affected by the growth of Aimee Semple-McPherson’s ministry there (98).

⁵³ Baer and Singer, *African-American Religion*, 51.

⁵⁴ Robert M. Franklin, “‘My Soul Says Yes’: The Urban Ministry of the Church of God in Christ,” in *Churches, Cities, and Human Community: Urban Ministry in the United States 1945-1985*, ed. Clifford J. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 84.

War II, constructing Mason Temple which at the time was “the largest black-owned auditorium in America.”⁵⁵

Yet, the success of COGIC was not without a cost for Mason. During World War I, Mason was targeted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) for his interracial activities and opposition to the war effort. Joe Maxwell relates the story in *Christianity Today*:

Mason’s words [about racism] were not empty platitudes. He traveled regularly with his aide, William B. Holt, a blond-haired German who was also a COGIC pastor ... The odd duo of Mason and Holt sparked far more than the standard suspicions over black-white alliances. FBI files show that the agency monitored Mason and Holt during World War I, especially since Mason preached pacifism. Still, Mason preached strong allegiance to the United States and condemned the Kaiser; nonetheless, his close friendship with Holt led the FBI to think Mason might incite American blacks to align with Germany ... Once Mason was arrested by federal agents and thrown into a Lexington, Mississippi, jail on charges of “violation of the Sedition Act.” Holt eventually gathered the money to bail out Mason, who continued to fellowship with whites, while condemning segregation and the widespread burning of black soldiers’ uniforms upon their return home from overseas.⁵⁶

Along with this personal investigation, the FBI was requested by the Federal Railroad Board “to look into the legitimacy of the Church of God in Christ, as the board was leery of providing reduced railroad passes to its ministers,” according to Sherry and Herbert Dupree.⁵⁷ These investigations did not hinder the growth of COGIC as it expanded its congregations into numerous major cities across America.

However, as COGIC grew, its members began to accommodate to the cultural values of the American middle class. Baer and Singer classify COGIC as a “conversionist sect” within their typologies of black religious traditions. According to them, “Conversionist sects tend to be “otherworldly” and apolitical in orientation and rely upon the willingness of the individual to

⁵⁵ Ibid., 80.

⁵⁶ Joe Maxwell, “Building the Church (of God in Christ),” *Christianity Today* (April 8, 1996): 26.

⁵⁷ Sherry S. and Herbert C. Dupree, *Exposed!!! Federal Bureau of Investigation Unclassified Reports on Churches and Church Leaders* (Washington, D.C.: Middle Atlantic Regional Press, 1993), v.

undergo a process of conversion as the meaningful way to affect social transformation.”⁵⁸

Rather than challenge the established social and political order, COGIC, like other conversionist sects, encouraged the development of appropriate behaviors among its members in order to facilitate their accommodation to the dominant culture. Yet, these groups do not easily acquiesce to the prevailing culture, as is evident with Mason’s critique of the American entrance into World War I. Baer and Singer comment:

Sanctified sects and other Black conversionist groups ... exhibit the complex and vacillating juxtaposition of protest and accommodation characteristic of African-American religion. Most notable in this regard is the lack of a rigid and unvarying stance toward either the meek acceptance of the status quo or the spiritual rejection of interest in this-worldly activism. Rather, over time, groups have evolved changing postures and concerns. Certainly historically and to a large extent today, most conversionist sects have been highly accommodative in that they emphasize otherworldly orientation and focus upon personal as opposed to social transformation. At the same time, they have exhibited a passive form of resistance in their rejection of mainstream values and aspirations.⁵⁹

So, even though COGIC had moved into the middle-class as its members have accommodated to American culture, the denomination still created a space in which African Americans could experience traditional African worship and the encouragement of a conscientious black community.

Aside from his early questioning of World War I, Mason held a more politically conservative view of the role of African Americans in society. Rather than continue to challenge the status quo, Mason focused on building a strong denomination which could support the urban migration of the African-American community. Raynard Daniel Smith comments, “[Mason] firmly believed in social equality. However, it appears that Mason recognized the sensitive nature that surrounded the race issue in the South. He was aware of its ability to incite white hostility leading to senseless violence and bloodshed that was usually at the expense of African

⁵⁸ Baer and Singer, *African-American Religion*, 61.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 176-77.

Americans. For this cause Mason advocated conciliation and gradualism in his approach to the race problem in the South.”⁶⁰ Mason died in 1961, having been the only leader of the denomination; COGIC was left without a strong pattern of leadership and without any response to the emerging civil rights movement. The only sign of Mason’s support of the movement is the 1948 concert which Paul Robeson performed at Mason Temple in support of Henry Wallace’s campaign as the independent Progressive Party presidential candidate.⁶¹ This small conjunction of the public with the religious space is a sign of Mason’s growing support for the civil rights agenda. However, the Robeson concert would pale in comparison to the rallies which would be held in Mason Temple twenty years later.

After a tumultuous period of transition, James Oglethorpe Patterson, Mason’s son-in-law, was elected as presiding bishop over the newly formed General Board of the Church of God in Christ in 1968. Patterson was the pastor of Pentecostal Temple Church of God in Christ, which met at the Mason Temple in Memphis, TN. Even prior to the sanitation workers’ strike in Memphis, Patterson and his congregation had been active in sponsoring voter registration drives among the African-American community and hosting political events at Mason Temple. According to Baer and Singer, the church had “played an instrumental role in the establishment of the Ministers and Christians league, an organization that spearheaded a drive that doubled the number of the Black registered voters in Memphis.”⁶² While Mason Temple is often remembered as the site of Dr. King’s last speech, he had already spoken there twice and many other civil rights leaders as well as protestors had utilized the facility during the sanitation workers’ strike. On July 31, 1959 King spoke at a freedom rally in Mason Temple, supporting

⁶⁰ Raynard Daniel Smith, “Seeking the Just Society: Charles Harrison Mason’s Quest for Social Equality,” in *Papers of the 31st Annual Meeting of the Society of Pentecostal Studies in Lakeland, FL, March 14-16, 2002*, by the Society of Pentecostal Studies (Society of Pentecostal Studies, 2002), 715.

⁶¹ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 19.

⁶² Baer and Singer, *African-American Religion*, 175.

Russell Sugarmon's campaign for city commissioner. According to Michael Honey, "King told black Memphians he was "delighted beyond power of words to see such magnificent unity," and added that he "had never seen such enthusiasm at a meeting of Negroes." He suggested that something never seen in the Movement before would happen in this city on the river."⁶³ For nine more years Memphis went unnoticed in the struggle for civil rights until a dispute between local sanitation workers and the city government escalated into a strike.

On February 1, 1968 two African-American sanitation workers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were killed when a garbage compactor malfunctioned on their truck as they sought shelter from the pouring rain. Their deaths, the sparse grievance pay offered to their widows, and the despicable working conditions of the sanitation department led to a strike on Monday, February 12, 1968. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) supported the sanitation workers' strike sending a team of four leaders, two white (Peter Ciampa and Joe Paisley) and two black (Jesse Epps and Bill Lucy), to organize the strike. Unfortunately they were met with strong opposition by the city's mayor, Henry Loeb, who refused to acquiesce to any of the strikers' demands. According to Honey, "The first truly mass meeting of community members and strikers occurred on Saturday night, February 17, [1968] as some 2,000 people listened to speeches by black ministers and white and black labor leaders at Bishop Charles Mason Temple, the home base for the rapidly growing Pentecostal Church of God in Christ. The current bishop, J. O. Patterson [Sr.], told them, 'What's mine is yours if you need it.' His congregation donated food and money, and people in the audience helped to bag food and give it out to strikers."⁶⁴ As the strike continued to escalate and lengthen, Mason

⁶³ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 31.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

Temple and Bishop Patterson would continue to find themselves involved in the movement in Memphis.

Along with Bishop Patterson's involvement with the strike, his son J. O. Patterson, Jr., also an ordained COGIC minister, played a prominent role in the strike. After obtaining a law degree from DePaul University in Chicago in 1963, Patterson, Jr. returned to Memphis to set up a law practice and pursue political office. In 1966, he was elected to the state legislature in Tennessee and the following year he was elected to the Memphis city council. Joan Beifuss claims, "On the Council he took an independent – some viewed it as uncooperative – stance early by refusing to attend the Tuesday morning executive sessions, which were closed to the general public. In principle, he was protesting any Council operation that was not completely open to all citizens, although newsmen were allowed into the executive sessions ... He was a loner and the Council, despite its differences, was already a group. He was a politician and they considered themselves, in some way, on a different level."⁶⁵ When the strike began, Patterson, Jr. sided with the strikers, a majority of whom represented his constituency. Patterson fought to get the city council to override the mayor's objections and acquiesce to some of the workers' demands. Unfortunately his proposals were frequently tabled and ignored by his white counterparts on the council.

On February 23, after being rejected by the city council a crowd of nearly a thousand angry strikers left city hall marching towards Mason Temple. Memphis police attempted to use their vehicles to divert the crowd, but after bumping some of the demonstrators chaos ensued and the police retaliated with mace and clubs. Honey notes, "When the bedraggled marchers finally reached Mason Temple ... the police had also arrived, now holding four-foot-long billy clubs."⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Beifuss, *At the River I Stand*, 147.

⁶⁶ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 208.

On Saturday, February 24, city attorneys claimed that union organizers had violated a 1966 injunction against encouraging a strike. According to Honey, “If AFSCME leaders went along with the injunction and ceased being leaders, or if they violated it and went to jail, the strike’s organization could collapse. But though the injunction could stop unionists, it did not apply to ministers, who remained free to instigate secondary boycotts, give speeches, and organize picket lines.”⁶⁷ The local African-American ministers did just that. On that same Saturday half of the city’s black ministers gathered in the basement of Mason Temple to form a group called Community on the Move for Equality (COME). Bishop Patterson represented the group at a news conference later that day along with James Lawson, Henry Starks, and Bishop Julian B. Smith. As the strike continued, Bishop Patterson offered Mason Temple as a site for various rallies and community gatherings, including a gospel fundraiser on March 3⁶⁸ and addresses by Bayard Rustin, of the A. Phillip Randolph Institute, and Roy Wilkins, president of the NAACP on March 14.⁶⁹ Then, on Monday, March 18, Martin Luther King, Jr. came to Memphis to address the situation. Honey observes, “As King flew to Memphis on Monday, March 18, a crowd of between 9,000 (a police estimate) and 15,000 (A Movement estimate) had already filled Mason Temple by 7 pm.”⁷⁰ Unlike many other local civil rights struggles, the Memphis strike had “brought together the labor struggle, civil rights, and the black religious tradition of prophetic oratory in a marvelous new convergence.”⁷¹ King also addressed the inter-denominational character of the movement in Memphis which had drawn together Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians and the Church of God in Christ for the first time. He called for the black community to engage in a general work stoppage demonstrating their

⁶⁷ Ibid., 218-19.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 251-52.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 281.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 292.

⁷¹ Ibid., 296.

economic impact on the city of Memphis; however, this would require King to return to Memphis in order to lead such a mass movement. The work stoppage was to be accompanied by a march on March 22. Unfortunately, a snow storm blanketed Memphis, forcing the march to be rescheduled for March 28. The day of the march numerous factors, including the lack of trained protestors, an influx of high school students, rumors of police brutality elsewhere in the city and King's tardiness, contributed to a palpable tension amongst the marchers. After only a few blocks some of the marchers became unruly breaking store windows and pushing at the front line of the march. Finally, Rev. James Lawson, pastor of Centenary Methodist Church and the march organizer, had King taken away from the march and called for the marchers to retreat. Unfortunately, during the confusion the Memphis police descended on the crowd with clubs, mace and tear gas intending to restore order but instead inciting further riot and looting. The violence which ensued was detrimental to the credibility of the Memphis strike as well as to the reputation of Dr. King. However, at the request of the Memphis organizers and his own advisors, King returned to Memphis on April 3 to organize the movement for a march scheduled for Monday, April 8. Although Rev. Ralph Abernathy, King's close associate, was scheduled to speak at Mason Temple that night, he could tell the crowd was disappointed that King was not there. According to Honey, "[Abernathy] immediately called King at his hotel and convinced him to come to Mason Temple."⁷² It was here that King delivered his final public address, "I've Been to the Mountaintop."

King's speech followed the tenor of the hundreds of speeches which he had delivered over the last decade, inspiring civil rights workers to strive forward with the cause. Yet, one particular passage seemed particularly relevant, given King was standing in one of the historic churches of African-American Pentecostalism. King declared:

⁷² Ibid., 415.

It's all right to talk about "long white robes over yonder," in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here! It's all right to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey," but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do.⁷³

That is precisely what COGIC had begun to do. They had not discarded preaching about the hereafter, but they had also become concerned with right now. COGIC had begun to combine the African spirituality which the black community appreciated with the struggle for freedom which the black community desperately needed.

However, the turmoil of the Memphis strike as well as King's assassination made COGIC uneasy about continuing to engage in civil rights demonstrations. Most churches returned to their normal pattern of creating a space for black community and encouraging the social uplift of their congregations. In Chicago, Bishop Louis Henry Ford, offered a clear example of this more conservative approach. According to Robert Franklin, "Whereas King represented a prophetic challenge to the political status quo, Ford's outlook was more accommodating. Ford believed that more economic goods and jobs could be attained by working with the establishment."⁷⁴ Thus, Ford positioned himself as an insider with the administration of Mayor Richard Daley in Chicago, attempting to make small gains for the black community whenever possible. Ford's election as presiding bishop in 1990 confirms the move of the Church of God in Christ from a grassroots activism to a conservative political agenda.

THE ASSEMBLIES OF GOD

Unlike COGIC which eventually united with the civil rights movement during the Memphis strike, the Assemblies of God approached issues of civil rights at a much slower pace.

⁷³ Martin Luther King, Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop" in *American Sermons: The Pilgrims to Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. Michael Warner (New York, NY: Library Classics of the United States, 1999), 880.

⁷⁴ Franklin, "My Soul Says Yes," 92.

In the early decades of the denomination a few African Americans were ordained and authorized to pastor or serve as missionaries.⁷⁵ However, they served in particular districts and were not recognized throughout the Assemblies. Due to the loose polity of A/G governance, the national administration followed a “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy with its local districts. Yet, in 1939 the issue of African-American ordination came before the General Presbytery,⁷⁶ forcing them to make a decision. According to Robeck, “The question, it turns out, originated in the Eastern District because Robert Brown, pastor of the prestigious Glad Tidings Tabernacle [New York City] was supportive of the full ordination of qualified candidates regardless of race.”⁷⁷ During their September 1939 meeting, the General Presbytery discussed the issue of ordaining African-American clergy. J. Roswell Flower, general secretary, claimed, “There was no race prejudice involved, but that the real problem was that by giving our papers to one of his race, we were introducing him into a ministerial relationship which took in more than the section in which he was laboring.” Since districts conferred ordination locally but the national office endorsed these ordinations, Flower and the other presbyters feared that African-American ministers would leave the district they had been credentialed in and move to other areas where their ministry was not welcome. After further discussion, “It was finally moved and carried that the General Presbyters express disapproval of the ordaining of colored men to the ministry and recommend that when those of the colored race apply for ministerial recognition, license to preach only be granted to them with instructions that they operate within the bounds of the District in which they are

⁷⁵ Robeck, “Historical Roots,” 28-29. Robeck names I.S. and Mattie Neeley, Ellsworth Thomas and Lee Hawkins as the four African Americans who were ordained prior to 1939.

⁷⁶ A/G church government consists of a few important groups: The Executive Presbytery (including all the elected officers and several regional presbyters), the General Presbytery (including a larger group of regional, ethnic and district representatives) and the General Council (all of the A/G clergy which meet bi-annually). The day-to-day operations of the denomination are fulfilled by the Executive officers with important decisions being brought before the Executive and General Presbyteries as necessary.

⁷⁷ Robeck, “Historical Roots,” 29.

licensed, and if they desire ordination, refer them to the colored organizations [i.e., COGIC].”⁷⁸

The question of ordaining African-American ministers would not be raised again until 1957, but in the meantime the A/G did address the question of establishing a “colored branch” within the denomination.

The General Presbytery first addressed the issue of a segregated branch within the denomination in 1946. During this meeting the General Presbytery went “on record as favoring the establishment of a colored Pentecostal church altogether separate and apart from the General Council of the Assemblies of God.”⁷⁹ However, as the denomination moved forward into the 1950s, no such church or branch was established and the leadership, like much of white America, seemed to be dragging its feet with regards to the issue. In 1954 and 1955, Ralph Riggs, the general superintendent, corresponded with Nicholas Bhengu, an African pastor who expressed interest in establishing an African-American branch of the A/G in the United States. Bhengu was a well-respected evangelist from South Africa whom Riggs had met during an Evangelism conference in Kansas City. According to Bhengu, “Some coloured people all over the States sent delegations to me with a view of influencing me to inaugurate and operate a coloured branch of the Assemblies of God ... I strongly feel that a Coloured wing of our work in the States would be an answer to parts of Africa where nationalism is gaining ground and there is no doubt that where the Africans have been granted self government or a Republic the white missionaries will have very little consideration. In that case we could make use of Negro well trained missionary.”⁸⁰ One of the hindrances to previous efforts at establishing an African-American

⁷⁸ “Minutes of the General Presbytery,” 5-12 Sept 1939, Social Problems and Standards – Blacks/Race Relations (File B), Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, MO.

⁷⁹ “Minutes of the General Presbytery,” 1946, Social Problems and Standards – Blacks/Race Relations (File B), Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, MO.

⁸⁰ Nicholas Bhengu to Ralph Riggs, 27 Jan 1955, Social Problems and Standards – Blacks/Race Relations (File D), Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, MO.

branch in the A/G was the lack of any ministers to establish such a movement. Riggs was truly intrigued by Bhengu's proposal, but he maintained some reservations. After consulting with his associates in the missions department, Riggs replied to Bhengu with hesitation: "What you say about establishing a Colored Branch of the Assemblies of God is of great interest to us. It, however, would be a revolutionary move in connection with our work here. You are aware of the race prejudice which exists, especially in our Southland. This would deter a rapid assimilation of the colored group with the other branches of the Assemblies of God."⁸¹ Bhengu responded that he never intended for his efforts to involve racial integration. He claimed, "It is also my opinion that any scheme to integrate the Negro Church and the White will be disastrous ... Any integration policy should be out of the question and it will come in its own time – a gradual process."⁸² Despite Bhengu's opposition to integration, the General Presbytery declined Bhengu's offer. Riggs replied to Bhengu:

I regret to advise you that the brethren of our General Presbytery did not consider it wise for us to proceed at this time to the organization of a colored church here in America. You yourself have said that "any scheme to integrate the Negro church to the white will be disastrous." This is exactly what our brethren felt. On the other hand, to build up a separate church for our colored brethren would likewise run counter to the present trend in American life. As you know, our Supreme Court has ruled in favor of integration. If we therefore build a church according to the segregation pattern, that would look as if we were defying the present trend in American life. So, rather than run into either of these difficulties, we feel it would be better for us to maintain the status quo at the present time.⁸³

Despite the General Presbytery's refusal to establish an African-American branch within the Assemblies, their response to Bhengu's offer demonstrates their awareness of the growing concern over segregation in America. On the one hand they did not offer a prophetic voice

⁸¹ Ralph Riggs to Nicholas Bhengu, 23 Feb 1955, Social Problems and Standards – Blacks/Race Relations (File D), Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, MO.

⁸² Nicholas Bhengu to Ralph Riggs, 6 Mar 1955, Social Problems and Standards – Blacks/Race Relations (File D), Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, MO.

⁸³ Ralph Riggs to Nicholas Bhengu, 12 Oct 1955, Social Problems and Standards – Blacks/Race Relations (File D), Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, MO.

against the status quo, but on the other hand they did not institutionalize segregation within the denomination. In many ways the A/G reflects David Chappell's observations of the white churches in the South: "The [white] churches failed to elevate their whiteness – the institutions and customs that oppressed black folk – above their other concerns ... They could not make defense of segregation the unifying principle of their culture."⁸⁴

While declining Bhengu's request, the A/G did begin to investigate the possibilities for integration within the denomination. In 1958, the General Presbytery appointed a Committee to Consider a Colored Fellowship. The Committee developed a report entitled "Segregation versus Integration." This report recognized, "that integration is a national problem and that full integration has not been accepted by either the North or the South."⁸⁵ Conceding that all people were created equal by God, the report warned, "It is one thing to take the stand that since all men are created equal, we should immediately integrate all our churches, and quite another to work out all the related problems."⁸⁶ The Committee feared that if A/G churches were integrated, African-American pastors, whose "ministry falls far below the average ministry of the whites," would be left without any churches in which to minister.⁸⁷ In addition, while the Committee was certain that white and black believers could worship together without any issue, they were concerned that both white and black unbelievers would be hesitant to worship in an interracial fellowship thus hindering the evangelistic efforts of the local churches. The report concluded that the A/G should make no public statement either for or against integration at present, but "should be ready to take the stand that we consider all men equal and are ready to integrate our

⁸⁴ Chappell, *A Stone of Hope*, 107.

⁸⁵ "Segregation versus Integration," 1958, p. 1, Social Problems and Standards – Blacks/Race Relations (File B), Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, MO.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

churches as soon as the general public is ready for such a move and it will not interfere with our progress and expansion as a movement.”⁸⁸

The A/G policy of inaction was finally confronted with the ordination of Robert Harrison. In 1951, Harrison graduated from Bethany Bible College, a regional A/G school, as the first African American to matriculate from the institution. Harrison, whose grandmother, Cornelia Jones Robertson, had been an Assemblies of God minister, applied for credentials with the Assemblies of God. Harrison’s application was rejected and he was informed by the district superintendent that the A/G did not allow black ministers within its ranks. Harrison continued his ministry, gaining renown as an evangelist and musician. Six years later, a new district superintendent, Leonard Palmer, apologized to Harrison and granted him credentials with the Northern California/Nevada District.⁸⁹ This procedure was in line with the 1939 General Presbytery action and the trajectory of the A/G regarding race. As long as Harrison did not seek ordination and remained within his district no policy would be breached. However, in 1958, Palmer wrote to Ralph Riggs relating, “there was a unanimous vote registered [by the district presbytery] to ordain Brother Robert J. Harrison as soon as favorable action is taken by the General Presbytery.”⁹⁰ Riggs replied that the General Presbytery would consider the issue, but he also related J. Roswell Flower’s warning, “We should remember that in accepting colored people into our churches on the integration pattern we would probably discourage white people attending our meetings.”⁹¹ The issue of Harrison’s ordination was postponed as both district and national leadership changed hands. Finally, in 1962 an external pressure forced the A/G

⁸⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁸⁹ Glenn Gohr, “For Such a Time as This: the Story of Evangelist Bob Harrison” *Assemblies of God Heritage* 24.3 (Fall 2004): 7.

⁹⁰ Leonard Palmer to Ralph Riggs, 5 Feb 1958, Social Problems and Standards – Blacks/Race Relations (File D), Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, MO.

⁹¹ Ralph Riggs to Leonard Palmer, 11 Feb 1958, Social Problems and Standards – Blacks/Race Relations (File D), Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, MO.

leadership to act. Harrison was selected to join Billy Graham as a member of his crusade team. He traveled all over Africa as well as the United States speaking as well as assisting Graham with the crusades. In the Assemblies of God archives a handwritten note, dated July 17, 1962 and initialed by General Secretary Bartlett Peterson, conveyed the response of the A/G leadership: “Robert E. Harrison ‘Negro’ – Ordination OK by Exec[utive] Action.”⁹² It was not that the Assemblies had changed their position with regard to African-American ministers, but the publicity of Harrison as an evangelist with the Billy Graham crusade was too good to pass up. A news release from the public relations department was issued on December 20, 1963: “An Associate of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association has become the first Negro approved for service under the Assemblies of God Foreign Missions Department.”⁹³

Harrison’s ordination did lead the Assemblies into greater awareness of the black community and the need to reach out to African-American ministers. In 1968, the General Presbytery issued “A Statement of Social Concern.” The statement declared “We of the Assemblies of God intend as citizens to make our influence felt where concrete social action is justified in areas of domestic relations, education, law enforcement, employment, equal opportunity, and other worthwhile beneficial matters. However, we affirm our deep conviction that the greatest need of man is for personal salvation through Jesus Christ, and we give this spiritual need its due priority.”⁹⁴ The priority of spiritual over physical needs was evident a few months later at the Council on Evangelism in St. Louis, MO. Among the dozens of papers and lectures regarding evangelism in the modern era, only one presentation offered any attention to the situation of urban evangelism or the African-American community. Later, in 1970 Robert

⁹² Loose Note Regarding Robert Harrison, 17 July 1962, Social Problems and Standards – Blacks/Race Relations (File D), Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, MO.

⁹³ “News Release,” A/G Public Relations Department, 30 Dec 1963, Social Problems and Standards – Blacks/Race Relations (File D), Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, MO.

⁹⁴ Menzies, *Anointed to Serve*, 394-95.

Harrison was invited along with the few other African-American ministers within the Assemblies to meet with General Superintendent Thomas Zimmerman to discuss the ways in which the A/G could better address the needs of the black community. While the dialogue offered many helpful suggestions, none of its recommendations were followed or implemented.⁹⁵ Gary McGee comments, “The General Council had passed a resolution favoring civil rights and condemning any kind of discrimination. Yet no agency within the denomination was added to work toward those ends. White Pentecostals rarely became involved in any prophetic witness against the injustices of the prevailing culture.”⁹⁶ Again, Grant Wacker’s comments are instructive: “No one should be surprised. Pentecostals were, after all, normal American Christians, subject to all the prejudices and confusions that afflicted most normal American Christians.”⁹⁷

CONCLUSION

In October of 1994, the Assemblies of God and the Church of God in Christ were brought together in a meeting which is commonly referred to as the “Memphis miracle.” The occasion was the final meeting of the Pentecostal Fellowship of North America (PFNA) which had been organized in 1948 by several white Pentecostal denominations, including the Assemblies of God. In 1994, the PFNA voted to abolish the organization in favor of a new group which would be more racially and theologically inclusive. Thus, the Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches of North America was founded. Much of the research cited above, especially Cecil Robeck’s essay, was a result of this meeting’s reflections on the racial tensions within Pentecostalism. During one of the sessions, Donald J. Evans, a white Assemblies of God pastor, approached COGIC Bishop Ithiel Clemmons and knelt to wash his feet. In response, Bishop Charles E. Blake was moved to

⁹⁵ See “Feasibility Study Committee,” 10 Feb 1970, Social Problems and Standards – Blacks/Race Relations (File C), Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, MO.

⁹⁶ McGee, *People of the Spirit*, 349-50.

⁹⁷ Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 235.

wash the feet of Thomas Trask, General Superintendent of the Assemblies of God.⁹⁸ This moment in Pentecostal history has been offered as a symbolic healing of the century-old rift between the Assemblies of God and the Church of God in Christ. However, the symbolism of this moment has not often been followed with action. Reflecting on the occasion, Bishop Clemmons has commented, “Days later we [Clemmons and his wife] wondered whether or not the deeply and genuinely repentant white pastor who washed my feet under the prompting of the Holy Spirit would or would not vote for Affirmative Action given the opportunity?”⁹⁹

The Assemblies of God and the Church of God in Christ will always be historically united through their common heritage of Azusa Street and their historic connections prior to 1914. Whether or not the founding of the Assemblies of God marked a formal separation between the two churches, it is clear that a *de facto* segregation was instituted which has yet to be overcome. Through the 1950s and 60s the Assemblies of God was challenged externally by the turmoil across America and internally by the call of its own ministers. Although the denomination remained conservative and constrained in its approach to the African-American community, the unwillingness to segregate the church officially also allowed the church to remain “integrated” (although still largely white). At the same time, the Church of God in Christ was challenged by the plight of their members and their communities. Once the movement came to Memphis, COGIC responded with wholehearted support. However, the chaos of the Memphis’ strike and the assassination of Dr. King marked the denomination, causing them to revert to a more conservative position, encouraging the uplift and success of their members rather than challenging the status quo. It is clear that both denominations are very far from those early days on Azusa Street and the color line has perhaps never been more visible.

⁹⁸ McGee, *People of the Spirit*, 582.

⁹⁹ Ithiel Clemmons, “What Price Reconciliation: Reflections on the ‘Memphis Dialogue’” *Pneuma* 18.1 (Spr 1996): 119.

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