**THE GREATEST CHALLENGE FACING THE 21ST CENTURY CHURCH**

**By William Dwight Mckissic, Sr.**

**MIBF 2019, WEDNESDAY, 11-13-2019**

**FAITHFUL CENTRAL BIBLE CHURCH, 400 W. FLORENCE AVE.**

**INGLEWOOD, CA 90301**

The late Dr. George McCaleb, Sr. was fond of saying, “The church at her birth was the church at her best.”

The greatest challenge facing the 21st Century Church is to emulate the “unity model” of the 1st Century Church—particularly with regard to their philosophy and practices on race, reconciliation and righteousness.

Jesus—the great head of the church—prayed that oneness (unity) would be a signature characteristic of His followers, for the distinct purpose of enhancing global evangelism and disciple-making.

The visual, verbal and vital unity of the church was on display at Pentecost. Luke recorded in Acts 2:1, “When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.”

God commands blessings upon His people, when they walk in unity for His purposes (Psalm 133:1-3).

The apparent lack of unity across racial lines may be why we are seeing a major decline in baptism and church growth across America.

God promised through His prophet Joel, and Peter on the day of Pentecost, to pour out His Spirit upon “all flesh” (Acts 2:17).

On the day of Pentecost, every nation under the sun was gathered at Jerusalem according to Acts 2:5. African, Asians and Anglos were all gathered at Pentecost, and there God poured out His Spirit upon His people.

The devil works overtime to keep the races divided, even within the church. Because, the devil knows if God’s people come together in the unity of Spirit, within the context of the local church, America will experience the third great awakening.

The 21st Century Church must again reflect the model of the 1st Century Church, in demonstrating visual, verbal and vital unity among the people of God.

Today’s church simply does not look like her biblical picture. [Illustration…waiting in the baggage claim area at the DC airport about 30 years ago.]

What did the picture of the 1st Century Church look like racially? To answer that question, we will examine the 1st Gentile Church in history—the Church at Antioch. At Antioch we will see a 1st Century model of making disciples and planting disciple-making churches that reflect the Church at Antioch.

The Church Planting Team that founded the Church at Antioch was multi-ethnic in its composition.

Antioch was a multi-ethnic city. It was the third largest city in the Roman Empire (after Rome and Alexandria), with a population in the first Century of about 500,000. It was a cosmopolitan and commercial city from its foundation. Its inhabitants included many Jews, Africans, Europeans and of course Asians. Located near the Mediterranean Sea, Antioch was accessible by boats and caravans to and from Africa, Europe and Asia. This multi-ethnic church planting team birthed a multi-ethnic congregation in a multi-ethnic city.

The Church at Antioch was led by Barnabas (European—Cyprus), Simeon who was called Niger (African-Cyrene), Lucius of Cyrene (African), Manaen (believed to have been Roman-European and Saul (Paul) from Tarsus (Southwest Asia). The Church at Antioch is a picture of how God wants His church to look today.

God sovereignly chose an African named Simon to carry the Cross of Jesus, so that Simon could take the gospel to the Cyrenians, and the Cyrenians (Africans) would plant the first Gentile church.

Dr. Thomas C. Oden lists eight reasons why Simon of Cyrene and “Simeon called Niger” are synonymous:

1. The names Simeon and Simon are varied spellings of the same name.
2. It is Mark alone of the four Gospel writers who earliest provides this unique and personal information about Simon of Cyrene: He was the father of Alexander and Rufus (Mk 15:21). Other Synoptic writers may have learned from Mark that Simon was from Cyrene.
3. If other arguments from Coptic historians should prove correct that Mark was from Cyrene, and Simon came from Cyrene, that would make more plausible that Mark alone of the three Synoptic writers knew Simon and his sons personally. The hypothesis is that Mark and Simon had ethnic and cultural affinities with the same Diaspora Jerusalem synagogue referred to in Acts 6:9—at that time messianic and activist.
4. It is an anomaly that “Simeon called Niger” had a Jewish name. *Niger* is Latin for “black.” This would fit the ethnic profile of a Jew known within the circle of disciples to be from Africa, and perhaps (though not necessarily) having darker skin. Whether he was the same person as the cross-bearer remains debated. We do not know, but what is clear is that Simon of Cyrene has a Jewish name, also spelled Simeon, and that he was a foreigner traveling to Jerusalem at feast time. In any event we must posit some reason why this Simeon was called Niger.
5. It has been overlooked that there is a mountain in Libya named Niger in the Garama region.
6. Remember that Jews had resided in Cyrene for three hundred years. The skin pigment of Berber Jews is unspecific, but could range from light to dark.
7. We know that Simon of Cyrene was a visitor to Jerusalem, remembered in a personal fashion by Mark and perhaps by Paul. We know that Simon called the Black was first mentioned as being among the “men of Cyrene” (Acts 11:19-20) who first undertook the mission to Greek speakers in Antioch and Cyprus. Saul of Tarsus himself had cultural affinities with these “prophets and teachers.” Some common link bound together Saul and the Cyrenians.
8. Simon the Black was a leader in a church founded by Cyrenians. These vectors point in the same direction: Simon of Cyrene was likely called Simon the Black.” (*Early Libyan Christianity; Uncovering a North African Tradition* by Thomas C. Oden, pp 101-102).

* A Cyrenian helped Jesus carry the cross (Mark 15:21).
* Cyrenians were present at Pentecost (Acts 2:10).
* Cyrenians studied the Old Testament in a Synagogue of Jerusalem (Acts 2:9).
* Cyrenians from Jerusalem, who had become believers “were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen” and traveled to Antioch and preached the Lord Jesus (Acts 11:19-21).
* Cyrenians were named among the leadership of the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1).

The Church at Antioch was gifted with prophets and teachers, worship, missions, and giving. A church is better in all aspects, when all God’s people are involved and included.

The first in the church at Jerusalem was over race. The solution was to ask Gentile leaders to be included in leadership.

In Acts 8, we see where God used a Greek-speaking man, to share the gospel with an African man, who was reading from a Jewish Bible, while riding across a Roman province.

At Bethlehem, we see the sons of Ham, the sons of Shem and the sons of Japheth (Psalm 72:10, 15).

At Calvary, the sons of Ham, Shem and Japheth showed up.

At the planting of the first Gentile church, the sons of Ham, Shem and Japheth showed up (Acts 13:1-2).

At Pentecost, the sons of Ham, Shem and Japheth showed up.

A careful study of the authors of the four gospels will reveal, Matthew was a Jew, Mark was an African and Luke was a Gentile. The gospels were written by the sons of Ham, Shem and Japheth.

How will we move toward a unity model in the 21 Century? We will have to take the chains off of our minds.

“How to reach the masses, men of ev'ry birth,  
For an answer Jesus gave the key:  
“And I, if I be lifted up from the earth,  
Will draw all men unto me.””