

Why Christians Care About Race

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Originally published May 2017 in *FPC News*

As pastors on staff, we often hear questions like, what does the topic of race have to do with faith? Why should our church spend time discussing race when there is so much else going on in the world around us that we could talk about?

It's a great question and a fair one. One way of answering lies in the story of Pentecost — the day when the church was born. Many of us have heard the story of fire, spirit, and tongues often enough that its strangeness and surprise wears dull. Yet, this fiery beginning for the church defied expectations and drove the disciples toward places, people, and relationships that ultimately became the foundation of the church.

Pentecost was a Jewish feast — still known today as Shavuot. At Pentecost Jews from every nation, geography, background, and color of skin poured thickly into the streets of Jerusalem. Imagine the streets buzzing much like Times Square on New Year's Eve. As the streets rumble with religious noise, Jesus' disciples are packed like sardines in a small, quiet room. They are praying and waiting, and waiting and praying. They are praying and waiting for the promise to come.

But promises from Jesus rarely come conventionally. Suddenly, and without warning, the Spirit drops upon them. In their ears the sounds of wind and thunder, in their eyes the sight of tongues set on fire, in their mouths the foreign sounds of tongues caught aflame with cultures and languages they had never visited nor heard spoken aloud.

And so, the Pentecost that began with a few Palestinian Jews praying with one another in their own Hebrew tongue became a full-blown inter-racial and multi-lingual worship service where Jews of every nation, race, and background were joined together.

This story of the birth of the church shows that the Holy Spirit is in the business of joining unlikely people together. Those present at Pentecost didn't stop at worshipping together. The languages they learned bound them to the lives, cultures, stories, and histories of people they never would have chosen for themselves.

In so many places in our lives we get to choose — choose where to live, choose where to work, choose who to marry, choose where to attend Sunday services. What

Pentecost teaches us is that God desires to choose whom we share our lives with and who we love. This is what being the church is all about: the shocking, scandalous, and surprising fact that the Holy Spirit is ever expanding the list of whom we share our lives with.

If we take Pentecost as our guide, we shouldn't be surprised that God is ever expanding who is on that list for us today. God is inviting us, as a historically white congregation, to imagine our lives intimately connected to the lives of people of other races — in our communities, in our daily activities, and in our worship.

However, as we read on in the book of Acts, it's important to realize alongside the early church that when it comes to race, we don't start with a blank slate. Even though the disciples had witnessed the fiery miracle of Pentecost, they were still blind to the fact that God was doing something both within and beyond their own Jewish identity.

Even Peter, the disciple at the helm, didn't expect God to invite Gentiles (read non-Jews) to the party. When God sends Peter just days after Pentecost to the house of a gentile named Cornelius, Peter says, "surely not, Lord" (Acts 10:14)! What business did a Jew have hanging with a Gentile?

There was a troubled history between the Jews and the Gentiles. Peter knew this history; it ran in his blood. Peter knows that this history pulses beneath every Jew-Gentile interaction. His choice was that Jews and Gentiles stay where they've always been — apart from one another. But as with Pentecost, the Holy Spirit had a better, more expansive, idea. And so Peter begrudgingly enters the house of a man as different from him as two people can be.

And what happens? The Spirit falls on all who are in the room — another Pentecost, another joining of peoples. Yet, if Peter had not yielded to the Spirit, you and I, as gentiles, would never have had a place in the church. Remembering our history — even the bad and ugly parts — enables us to be like Peter and allow God to do a new and wonderful thing.

Why care about race? Because God is inviting us to hear the witness of our past and driving us into a future immeasurably more whole, faithful, and surprising than we could possibly imagine.