

“On Fire”

By Wayne Benson, 5-30-20

Minneapolis, Detroit, New York, Chicago, Memphis, Oakland CA, Washington DC. Each of these cities and several more were burning last night, torched in the flames of angry protesters. How did this begin? How will it end? After billions of dollars in damage have been calculated, and businesses have been shut down permanently, what productive changes will have been accomplished?

As I watched the demonstrations last night, the images tended to fall into the deeply etched memories of the '60's because it all looked the same. There were civil rights marches over racial inequality and segregation. There were protests over the Vietnam War. What were the lasting results? What do I most remember about those days?

While the news media wasn't as fluid as today's social media culture, the cameras were there recording both peaceful marches as well as the violent destruction. Of course, like today, flames always become the most riveting focus. But I can barely remember the news reports of the protests. What is seared into my memory was seeing the burned down hulls of stores that once were the heartbeat of Detroit. Woodward Avenue looked like a war zone.¹ Probably the centerpiece of the area at the time was the Sears store. It never recovered, nor did the jobs that were lost with it.

Were there lasting positive changes through that painful era of history? Yes. Important changes. Powerful changes. But were those changes directly related to the volume-level of angry voices in the streets or the amount of destruction left in the wake of violent protests? Probably not. Once the death and destruction were assessed economically and emotionally, people were just sad, disgusted, angry or ashamed. It increased the urban flight dramatically. The police and national guard presence became ubiquitous. And the heartbeat of a powerful city began to shudder.

Yet there were changes...lasting changes. The Civil Rights Movement became a national cry for justice and equality. The Vietnam War eventually came to an end – and a nation learned some valuable lessons about “unwinnable war strategy” and dishonored soldiers. Laws and policies were changed along with those who made them. But burned-out buildings didn't advance that cause. The violence hurt – probably delayed – progress for years. It polarized people and further divided the country. Likewise, the image of returning soldiers splattered with urine or blood and called “baby-killers” only hardened the hearts of the majority who valued their sacrifice.

Bullying rarely creates a culture for lasting change. A bully may get his victim on the ground, but long before the victim stands again, his opinion of the bully will only be confirmed.

¹ DetroitNews.com, re:1967 riots, “By the end of the week, 2,509 stores had been looted, burned or destroyed, including 611 supermarkets and grocery stores, 537 cleaners, 326 clothing and fur stores, 285 liquor stores and bars, 240 drug stores and 198 furniture stores, according to American Insurance Association data listed in “Violence in the Model City.”

What changed the conscience of the country? Why was the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. exalted and other names forgotten? Was it because he was assassinated? Was it because he and his followers were often the “victim on the ground?” Had he not been murdered, would American life have remained the same? Other public figures died without leaving such a dramatic legacy of change.

Martin Luther King gave consistent, clear leadership. His messages became a theme that pounded like a drumbeat in the hearts of common people. He not only protested the inequities of the time but also the violence of those who tried to hijack his message. Yes, at times he advocated civil disobedience when the law itself was clearly unconstitutional. The Rosa Parks bus ride and the black youths who sat at the counter of a “white-only” restaurant will ever be remembered for their courage. But King demonstrated remarkable wisdom in standing between both those who wanted his voice silenced and those who wanted it strident and violent...and pushing back on both.

He had a clear vision – and we still hear his words today. They will never be forgotten. And the lasting change became enshrined in laws and etched in the hearts of people who admired him or his work. King helped change a culture. He captured the imagination of people on both sides of politics. He won the hearts of powerful allies of all races. His message was inspiring, consistent and urgent. And his appeal was for peaceful, non-violent coexistence. The bullies, the hard-nosed racists...some died in infamy, but all their voices were eventually silenced. I’m sure there are words spoken by Bull Connor or George Wallace recorded somewhere – but I don’t remember any of them.

Culture changed. Ironically, the southern tier states had been politically staunch Democrat from the time of the emancipation until the Civil Rights Movement. Lincoln, being a Republican President, only entrenched that political polarization after the carnage of the Civil War. But the injustice and inequality of racism began to be exposed. And it changed a culture. Not to suggest that the Republican Party is the safe harbor against injustice today, but I do believe that many fled the “old guard” and it began to show up in politics. Of course, that was years ago.

Why have we backslidened? Why do I feel the same frustration, anger, or sadness that I felt back in the ‘60’s? How could we advance so far only to find ourselves here again? This time it may come under the guise of police brutality, mass incarceration, white privilege...and a dozen other themes that all fall within the same cauldron of justification for anarchy, violence and destruction. Will the protests that erupt into burned out neighborhoods bring about positive change? No, it will likely postpone it.

We lack the powerful leadership that speaks to the conscience of America in a clear, consistent voice. We listen to chants of anarchy in the backdrop of burning buildings. The average peace-loving American is not attracted to a movement that suggests the violent overthrow of our government. Indeed, the most radical among the protesters, once again, are not even from the local area. The Detroit Police chief indicated that two-

thirds of last night’s arrests consisted of people not from the area. The governor of Minnesota reflected the same. It’s much easier to burn down the stores where you don’t shop or work.

I recently listened to the posts of black friends, some of them pastors. It broke my heart to hear of their sense that the skin they were born with defined them. While I watched in horror at the brutality of a police officer as he casually smothered the life out of George Floyd, they watched a white officer kill an unarmed black man. And, without knowing anything about the victim’s criminal behavior, without knowing the final results of investigations or autopsies, black or white, we are outraged. But they are black...my friends. Perhaps even if the white cop would have had his knee on a white suspect, it might have been the same result. Murderous brutality knows no color, and death is death! But my heart was broken for their sense of “I’m black...and it makes a difference.” Perception is our only reality. Racism is often perceived in the light of appearances. But it is felt in the weight of history. I’m not black, but I feel the pain and frustration of my brothers. It breaks me!

What on earth can we do about this? How do we make lasting change? I have friends who pastor in Minneapolis. I actually thought about perhaps locking arms with them in some sort of a peaceful expression of solidarity...yes, marching together, MLK style. However, they, like me, want no part of association with anarchy and violence. What they want is change...cultural, lasting change. Change in the collective conscience of America.

How do we do that? I’m going to suggest that “we” don’t...not without the help of God Almighty...not without the moving of the Holy Spirit over the hearts of men, women...their children and grandchildren. The scripture says it has not “entered into the heart of man all that God has prepared for those who love Him. For to us God revealed them through the Spirit...”²

In the early days of the 20th century, racism and resentment was widespread in America. Barely four decades after the Civil War, the memory of slavery, division, and loss was punctuated by the memory of over 600,000 lives snuffed out by the war. The economy was devastated by a world-war. And a pandemic of two plagues³ had swept through the world.

Someone once said that “a coincidence is a small miracle where God chooses to remain anonymous.”⁴ It is no coincidence that the flame of the modern-day Pentecostal Movement was ignited in the midst of that era. In total contrast to the segregation of the day⁵ and the laws propping it up, people of all races and nations met together in a

² 1 Cor 2:9-10

³ Bubonic Plague, 1890-1900; Spanish Flu, 1918-1920

⁴ Attributed to both Heidi Quade and Albert Einstein

⁵ In *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), the Supreme Court outlawed segregated public education facilities for blacks and whites at the state level. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 superseded all state and local laws requiring segregation.

converted horse barn on Azusa street just outside Los Angeles. Some newspapers carried headlines condemning the civil disobedience of mixed races integrating to worship. Not only did God place His hand upon William Seymour⁶, a black man, blind in one eye, his disability clearly visible, but also God raised up powerful women like Amy Simple McPherson or Alice Reynolds Flower who had powerful voices, in spite of the gender inequality of the day.

What God did was not only amazing...it was impossible! In the most unlikely time, and the least likely culture, with the most unlikely people, God chose to ignite a revival that spread to every nation in the world. Today there are a half-billion Spirit-filled believers around the world. Virtually every revival seems to have the influence of charismatic or Pentecostal believers. Dramatic change happened. It was not a flame that flickered and was eventually extinguished by the culture – it was a change that is here to stay until Jesus comes back for His Church.

This is not to suggest that every believer embraces the contemporary nature of the gifts of the Spirit. Nor is it possible that every Pentecostal or charismatic fellowship agrees on every fine point of doctrine. What we know is that the Holy Spirit was not limited by racism, lawlessness, inequality, injustice or national boundaries. Even in communist countries where atheism was promoted and the Church was persecuted, the Holy Spirit moved in the hearts of people. The underground church of China grew exponentially, for example. Apparently, God didn't ask permission from the Chinese government to blow His Wind over the nation. Do we put God on trial for civil disobedience? Really? No, the reality is, in God's divine sovereignty, prophetic pieces of His eschatological puzzle snapped into place “for such a time as this.” In Rom 13:1⁷, God tells us that we must obey the laws of men. But in Acts 5:29, after the resurrection, when the Church was ordered not to preach or teach in the name of Jesus, the Early Church was forced to conclude, “We must obey God rather than men.”⁸ Obviously, God's law is supreme.

God's laws will always triumph over the laws of men. Even our nation's founding documents acknowledge that.⁹ Some things will be right or wrong because God has forever declared it to be so. Other things will be right or wrong because the Holy Spirit prompts us or checks us. The only thing that will bring about long-term, cultural change – century-lasting change – is the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of men. Do we need to confront injustice when we see it? Of course – but in the wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit. Do we need to speak with a unified voice? Absolutely. But you won't find that unity in a political party or in one, single cause.

⁶ William Joseph Seymore (1870-1922) is considered the most influential leader if not “the father” of the modern Pentecostal Movement.

⁷ Rom 13:1 “Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.”

⁸ Acts 5:27b-29 “...the high priest questioned them, saying “We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching...But Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than men.’”

⁹ “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights...” Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

At the risk of sounding cliché, we need a spiritual awakening! Desperately! Changing a law won't change a heart. Burning down another building or throwing bricks at police will only harden hearts. May God awaken the Church to its mission and give preachers a backbone of steel. And may they speak with a unified voice. We need the fire of God to burn in the hearts of believers. May it be said of us as it was of the early Christians, “those who have turned the world upside down have come here also.”¹⁰ And may we fulfill the prayer request of Jesus, Himself, who prayed, “that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that you sent Me.”¹¹

In the bonds of Calvary,
Wayne

¹⁰ Acts 17:6

¹¹ John 17:21