

Dr. H. Vinson Synan

Memorial Service Remarks

Dr. Doug Beacham

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Rock Church, Virginia Beach

Hebrews 11:1-4

"Vinson Synan, though dead, yet speaketh"



Recently, Bishop Dayton Birt and I were on a call with other International Pentecostal Holiness Church ministers discussing resources available for ministerial training. We recognized that on our website are videos of Dr. Synan teaching IPHC history. We are also grateful we have his great collection of writings that are accessible to so many. Through these mediums Vinson Synan will continue to speak for as long as any of us can imagine.

In light of events that are transpiring in our nation at this time, particularly since the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, I found myself wondering when the IPHC in its official magazine began to talk about racism. The most important resource for this is the *Pentecostal Holiness Advocate*, which began in 1917 and continued until the middle 1990s. For most of its history, the magazine was a weekly chronicle of what was occurring in our own denomination.

Fortunately, the *Advocate* is available online where it can be searched. I decided to do a search through the entire archives for the word “racism.” The first instance of that word in the *Advocate* was on January 18, 1969. The writer used his article to describe the founding of Emmanuel College in Franklin Springs, Georgia in 1919. The year 1969 was the fiftieth anniversary of this IPHC flagship institution. The writer referenced that G.F. Taylor started the school during a global pandemic, the Spanish flu. He also mentioned the racism that it was occurring during a time of rising white nationalism as the Ku Klux Klan spread in the south and the north. That writer was Vinson Synan.

As you know, Vinson Synan was a son of the south, a Virginian, as are many of us gathered here today. But instead of living his life conformed to the spirit of the dominant cultural mandate of his generation, he began to grasp the larger meaning of Scripture and the Pentecostal experience at Azusa Street. There, in 1906, William Seymour and a host of blacks, whites, Asians, and Hispanics came to understand that the Holy Spirit was at work

bringing forth a new humanity and community. It's important to recognize that this was but ten years after *Plessy v Ferguson* in 1896, which institutionalized the civil and social doctrine of "separate but equal."ⁱ Not only did Synan recognize that the Holy Spirit's work went beyond speaking in tongues and towards the greater view of the Spirit's work among all God's people, but he came to recognize the importance of the Spirit's work in bringing racial healing and hope.

In 1948, white Pentecostals formed the Pentecostal Fellowship of North America, and no black Pentecostal denominations were included. By 1994, many white Pentecostal leaders recognized the error of those earlier decades. Led by black leaders in the Church of God in Christ and by Pentecostal leaders from the IPHC, the Assemblies of God, the Church of God, and others, these leaders met in Memphis, Tennessee and formed a new organization, the Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches of North America, with a commitment to racial healing.

If you go to IPHC archives on Facebook, you will see a 15-minute [video clip of the 1994 Memphis Miracle](#). In that clip you will hear Church of God in Christ leaders; you will hear IPHC General Superintendent B.E. Underwood, and you will hear Vinson Synan, pointing us to the promise of Pentecost and the Azusa Street revival. You will hear Vinson Synan "yet speaking" to us of the promise of the Father.

And today, in the midst of our current struggles, Vinson Synan is still speaking to us. A few weeks ago, I became aware of an important new book, *The Color of Compromise* by Jemar Tisby. The subtitle tells it all: *The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism*. It's an important book. In chapter seven, Tisby chronicles the opportunities and failures among Pentecostals following Azusa Street. But he also mentions the possibilities from the Memphis Miracle. Five times he quotes Vinson Synan in this significant book.ⁱⁱ In our current environment, Vinson Synan "yet speaketh," calling us to what the Holy Spirit seeks to do among His people in this broken world. May Jesus Christ be praised. Amen.

ⁱ I am not aware of any writers of the Azusa Street era observing the sharp difference and the timeline between *Plessy* and Azusa Street. The closest may be Frank Bartleman's observation that at the Azusa Street the color line has been broken. This is a point that needs greater attention given that we continue to deal with racial division all these years afterwards.

ⁱⁱ Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019) pp. 113-115.