

Let's Join Fred Price's Crusade

TO ME, THE SADDEST CHAPTER IN American history deals with the 244 years of slave trade and the legacy of 135 years of racism that have followed since the Emancipation Proclamation officially ended slavery in 1863. As a white man, there is no way I can fully understand what it's like to experience racial prejudice. Yet, as I have become close friends with a few African Americans, and as we've probed beneath the polite exterior that blacks and whites usually maintain when they relate to each other, I have begun to understand.

I have agonized many times over why belief in Jesus doesn't overcome the racism that permeates our society. Sadly, believers are often as guilty of prejudice as the unredeemed.

Ninety years ago, for a few glorious months, blacks and whites came together at the Azusa Street Mission under the ministry of a black man—William Seymour. One church historian wrote that "the color line was washed away by the blood." Yet after less than a decade, blacks and whites were separating into denominations such as the Assemblies of God and the Church of God in Christ.

When the civil rights movement occurred in the 1960s, white Pentecostals and charismatics were strangely silent. Black Christian leaders, however, saw the civil rights movement as a "move of God."

My white friends can't fathom that what they see as a secular political movement could have been a move of God. My black friends see establishing justice as something God is very interested in—

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as much as, or more than, standing against abortion as legitimate medicine or homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle.

Today, one bright spot is that many charismatic congregations are much more integrated than they were 10 years ago. However, the leadership of these churches is almost always white.

Few whites are comfortable in a church with a black leader. Most whites don't realize they think this way, but it bothers African Americans. The pain African Americans feel from this is deep, yet their pain is a nonissue for all but a handful of whites.

One man who understands the deep racial divisions in this country is Fred Price. As one of the first blacks to have a major national television ministry, he is widely respected.

Now Price is using his considerable influence to shine the spotlight on the passive racism that permeates the church. His prime example is an audiotape from a major charismatic leader (whom he never names) who is explaining to his congregation why it is better for blacks and whites to date members of their own races.

My position on this subject is clear, and we've written about it several times: There is only one race—the human

race. To me, the question of interracial marriage is a nonissue. The Bible only forbids Christians to marry unbelievers.

I grew up in an environment in which it wasn't considered racist to "prefer" marrying "your own kind." But for blacks, this one issue is the litmus test of whether or not someone is a racist. They believe that rejecting someone in marriage because of his or her color means you look down on the person, which means you are racist—end of discussion.

Yet the core problem isn't merely interracial marriage. It's the racial inequity that exists at every societal level.

The issue to me is that most white Christians don't care. And few white leaders are speaking up. Why must a black man—Fred Price—be the one to speak up on television, while white preachers talk instead about the Second Coming or how to get out of debt?

The church must take a leadership role in racial reconciliation by dealing first with its own racism. Christian leaders must join Fred Price in identifying the seriousness of this problem and focusing on solutions.

The Lord is bringing blacks and whites together in many ways. The enemy would love to separate the races again the way he did when the Assemblies of God went its own way from the Church of God in Christ after the Azusa Street Revival.

Let's not let that happen again. □

STEPHEN STRANG is the founding editor of *Charisma*. To share your views about racial conditions in the body of Christ, click on the "Sound Off!" icon at the *Charisma* Web site (www.charismamag.com).

