

Churches need to ‘pass the salt, turn on the light’

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ST. LOUIS (BP)—Responsibility for racial reconciliation rests at the doorsteps of the church and can be achieved only through the gospel in action, a diverse panel of Baptist pastors said during a public conversation at the 2016 Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in St. Louis.

Southern Baptist Convention President Ronnie Floyd convened the panel, whose participants included Jerry Young, president of the historically African-American National Baptist Convention USA.

Contaminated salt and concealed light

“Somebody needs to pass the salt and turn on the light,” said Young, pastor of New Hope Baptist Church in Jackson, Miss.

Racism is a sin problem that can only be solved by the people of God, he asserted.

“The problem in America is a problem with the church being what God called it to be,” Young said. “The problem (is) contaminated salt, concealed light, whereby we do not express the love of Christ nor extend his light.”

The nine-member panel included African-American, Hispanic, Anglo, American Indian and Asian pastors of varying ages.

“Being together here at this significant moment in America where racial disunity is occurring, and few are speaking into this discussion, it is our responsibility as the church of Jesus Christ to resound the power of the gospel and the unconditional love of Christ for all people into this conversation,” Floyd said. “It is our responsibility to have this historic

conversation today for our present and for our future.”

Impact of Charleston church shooting

The panel discussion was held a few days before the first anniversary of the June 17, 2015, racially motivated massacre of a pastor and eight church members at the historic Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C.

Panelist Marshall Blalock, pastor of First Baptist Church in Charleston, referenced the “grief and grace” his city experienced after 21-year-old white supremacist Dylann Roof slaughtered worshippers who had welcomed him into a Bible study. That experience, Blalock said, helped white Americans understand the true pain of racism.

“For so many years, white people have not really been able to capture and understand the true pain, the true hurt of racism, at least not experientially,” Blalock said. “But racially motivated murder hurt all of us. The white community for the first time, in some ways, would experience the depth of the pain. For the first time, beginning to understand, it was our church that was attacked, our people, our brothers and sisters, our neighbor. Our city was made one by grief.”

Segregated hearts

The church needs to ask itself whether it is practicing segregation, Blalock said, encouraging those present to search their hearts.

“Only the gospel can change hearts. Only the gospel can eliminate racism,” Blalock said.

Years ago, Blalock acknowledged, he realized he had a “segregated” heart when a black pastor and friend took him through an African-American neighborhood and introduced him to individuals he never had taken the

time to notice.

“That day, (my friend) walked me through a neighborhood where we stopped and shook hands and visited with people, and for the first time I realized it was me. My own heart was segregated,” he said. “I had no intention of living that way, just like none of you have any animus toward black people. But yet, it’s subtle, and I allowed it to sneak into my soul.”

Violent incident exposed ‘societal infection’

Kenny Petty, senior pastor of The Gate Church in St. Louis, spoke from the vantage point of the racial turmoil that erupted nearly two years ago in Ferguson after the killing of Michael Brown.

“What was happening then and what was present then was an infection—a historical, a societal infection—that was exposed by an incident, like the incident in Charleston, the incident in Florida,” the killing of Trayvon Martin, Petty said. While healing has occurred, much more is needed, he added.

“The infection just didn’t stop at the doorstep of the culture, but that infection was also in the church and needed to be exposed,” he said. “It’s a good thing that we’re having sessions like this.”

Wake up the church

H.B. Charles, pastor of Shiloh Metropolitan Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla., said racism is rooted in sin. The church is asleep, just like Jonah in the Old Testament was asleep as a storm raged in the sea, Charles said

And “the Lord is trying to wake the church up,” he asserted.

David Um, senior pastor of Antioch Baptist Church in Cambridge, Mass., and chaplain at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said the smartest people in the world have invented no cure for racism.

“The students I encounter at these elite and intellectual institutions are most certainly not racist. Just ask them. They are the enlightened ones,” he said. “They have evolved beyond racial divisions ... or so they assume.”

But they are “completely blind to their personal biases and bigotries.”

“You cannot educate away racism, because you cannot educate away sin,” Um said. “Sin is the problem. Racism is just another sin.”

Former SBC President Fred Luter Jr., pastor of Franklin Avenue Baptist Church in New Orleans, also served on the panel, along with Timmy Chavis, pastor of Bear Swamp Baptist Church in Pembroke, N.C.; Joe Costephens, pastor of First Baptist Church in Ferguson, Mo.; D.A. Horton, pastor of Reach Fellowship in Los Angeles; and Gregg Matte, pastor of First Baptist Church in Houston.