



FALL INTO GRACE

CARLTON PEARSON SHEDS HIS PENTECOSTAL ROOTS FOR WINGS OF POSSIBILITY

by donna mosher
photos by doug henderson

THE BEAUTIFUL CENTURY-OLD EPISCOPAL CHURCH in downtown Tulsa proclaims the established demeanor one would expect of its grand English Gothic architecture, glorious clerestory of stained glass, and massive pipe organ. Intricately carved angels and archangels and all the sanctity of heaven, in stained glass and carved oak, look down from on high. Like any sanctuary on a Christmas Eve, the pews are filled with worshippers anticipating a joyous observance of faith and a bit antsy for the holiday festivities to follow.

But little else is typical about this holy celebration. It is one o'clock in the afternoon and a café-au-lait crowd – black and white, young and old – packs the pews. Blacks crowd into the front rows; the white folks tend to gravitate to the back. Some are dressed in their

holiday finest, bedecked, even, with hats and gloves. Others don more comfy blue jeans – it is Sunday afternoon, after all. Kids are scattered everywhere.

Led by a lively choir and three-piece band, spirited music melts the mind into the heart and infuses this service with the heartfelt energy that one really can find only in an African-American congregation. Everyone moves to the beat and the verses go on forever.

The service is a celebration – there is nothing solemn about it. Applause after each performance delivered with gusto. Visitors are warmly welcomed. The collection is gratefully received.

And now it's time. Bishop Carlton Pearson – hip, to be sure, in a vibrant red vestment and bright white clerical collar topped with a silver double-breasted

jacket - steps into the pulpit to preach his newfound, New Thought, “Gospel of Inclusion,” sprinkled with a bit of persistent evangelism. His sermon presents Pentecostal possibility, blending traditional biblical scripture with metaphysics, comparing the “mythical Christ” to the “mystical Christ Consciousness.” His animated delivery is peppered with encouragements to “Talk to me, brother,” with responses of “Amen!” reverberating throughout the sanctuary.

Then came the kicker: Everyone is already saved. Everyone. Whether they know it or not.

Only a year earlier, Carlton Pearson and a handful of disciples, found themselves homeless and in search of a place to birth a new church. Trinity Episcopal Church took them in, offering them sanctuary and a place to worship in their off hours. Now Pearson is packing the place for what he calls “the friendliest, trendiest, most radically inclusive worship service” in town.

FROM GHETTO TO GOLDEN CHILD

Pearson hadn’t always opened his arms in invitation to just anyone, but to those who might consider themselves God’s “chosen” people. In three decades, this charismatic preacher rose from grass-roots Pentecostal tent revivals to Presidential prayer partner. He left his youth in an all-black ghetto in Southern California to attend Oral Roberts University in mostly segregated Tulsa, Oklahoma; the famed televangelist Roberts anointed Pearson as a “golden child” and embraced him as his “black son.” In 1981, Pearson established his own church in primarily white south Tulsa, drawing 5,000 black and white worshippers who would fill the offering plates with \$50,000 on a typical Sunday to support a burgeoning ministry.

Pearson’s faith was not blind; this bright and well-educated preacher backed up his sermons with scripture and his own fanatical research. He blended his personal charisma with a fierce mind into messages that spoke to millions. He launched a major evangelical festival; he counted as his theological peers religious leaders the likes of Billy Graham, James Dobson, and Ted Haggard; he traveled in private planes from the White House to the West Coast.

At the end of 1996, Bishop Pearson was at the top of his game. And then, one evening, he sat down in his living room, pulled his baby daughter, Majesty, into his lap, and flipped on the news.

REVELATION

Rwandan refugees – weak, starving, and homeless – were returning to their homeland two years after the country’s massive genocide. Watching them on the screen from the comfort of his easy chair, Carlton was

moved to despair. As a fundamentalist minister, he knew the price of his promise of salvation: he was pledged to save as many souls for Christ as he possibly could in his lifetime. But this staggering challenge to reach hundreds of thousands of Rwandan souls seemed insurmountable. Carlton went to the only place he knew he could find an answer.

“God,” he asked, “how can you call yourself loving and allow these people to suffer so desperately and then just suck them into hell?” He trusted he would hear the voice of God; it had never failed him before. And, he says, he did.

“Is that what you think I’m doing?”

“They need to be saved,” Pearson entreated, assuming they weren’t Christians.

“Go save them.”

“I *can’t* save all of them!” Pearson replied.

“Precisely. You can’t. That’s what we did. We’re



not sucking them into hell, can't you see they're already there? In your religious presuppositions, you keep creating hell for yourselves and others. I'm taking them into My presence."

That's when Pearson got it. God did not create hell. Hell was man's invention, not God's intention.

"We create hell for each other on this planet," Pearson says he came to realize on that fateful evening. "So the God I had been preaching about had to be a monster to take people into the customized torture chamber we call hell forever."

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INTO THE WILDERNESS

Carlton Pearson didn't become one of the country's most revered Christian leaders without some smarts. As he pondered this divine revelation, he did his homework. He studied scripture. He delved into Church history. He consulted his Source, whom he heard say, "I want you to re-present me to the world."

The only oracle he ignored was the local psychic.

Had he known how much it would cost him, Pearson said, he might have kept his revelation to himself. He lost everything. Or so it seemed.

Rarely is our authentic path revealed to us beyond

the next step or two. If it is, it probably is not our path, but someone else's. Pearson stepped out eagerly with his deeply developed message of universal salvation and presented it to his congregation.

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Jesus died for everyone, his good news proclaimed. The whole world is saved – they just don't know it. Muslims, Jews, gays – *everyone* is going to heaven. "When we stop believing in an angry God," Pearson told his followers, "we'll stop being angry. When we stop believing in hell, we'll stop creating it."

Pearson says he was so preoccupied with his newfound awareness that he didn't see what was sneaking up behind him. "From where I was – at the pinnacle – I saw a new evolution of consciousness. All my focus was going into what I was discovering. I was so drawn into this growing awareness that I was not aware of what I was leaving."

His fall from the mountaintop hit hard. Fearful of abandoning their conviction in the inerrancy of the Bible, Pearson's huge Tulsa congregation virtually abandoned him. With accusations of blasphemy, the country's evangelical community crucified him as a pariah. The largest publication in Charismatic media ran negative articles about him, every month for an entire year. He was formally labeled a heretic.

As he turned 50, Pearson found himself in the midst of a dark night of the soul. His congregation had dwindled to a handful of the converted. He had no staff. He was deeply in debt to a building and church commitments that he could not fulfill. He and his wife had two children to support. His lifelong evangelical community rent their garments in grief and moved on, as if he were dead.

"My life's work was in south Tulsa," Pearson says. "And now I didn't even have a church. I had a huge ministry – and it was all gone. I was stripped of everything. And I had to wrestle with my shame.

"Only when I got past the illusion of shame could I become whole."

FROM SELF-LOATHING TO LOVE

Enmeshed in personal and professional devastation, Pearson turned to the example of his master teacher, Jesus Christ.

"Most people know you from your past," Pearson says. "They can't see your future. Jesus asked his disciples, 'Who do you say that I am?' What's the word on the street? They could only see his past – they had no forward perception, they didn't see his Christology."



photo by Mark Thompson

Pearson stepped from his past and began a ministry of love and inclusion, starting with himself.

“My ministry was based on self-loathing,” he says. “It is the nature of fundamentalism. We damned ourselves to a hell we had created because we were human. And I was arrogant; I will admit it. We [fundamentalists] had to demean others to make ourselves feel righteous.”

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In that self-loathing, Pearson found himself. “I didn’t know how fond I was of ‘me’ until everyone questioned my authenticity. And everyone left me. I had to go inward. I had to comfort myself. I had to honor my own questions. I had to treat myself with respect.

“If I can love me while my world loathes me, I can love those who loathe me, and others who feel loathed.

“Once you do that, you attract those who can comfort you. That comfort doesn’t always come from those you expect. Scripture says, ‘Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.’”

Just as he still quotes scripture, Pearson still proclaims his faith in Jesus as a savior, emphasizing that salvation is everyone’s. He also preaches the blessing of self-actualization: “reconnecting to the Essence that sent you to this earthly experience.”

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“Most religions teach the fear of God, insisting we must please a difficult, remote and removed God. But such hostility and distance don’t exist except in our own minds. We have constructed our own deity. We have more faith in fear than in God. But you can no more offend God than you can offend the rain or violate wind.

“My perception of God is different now. I see ‘God’ as an ‘Infinite, Massive, Ultimate’ power, a God I cannot define, because I cannot define infinity. How can the finite define the Infinite?”

BORN AGAIN, AGAIN

A new life brings its share of challenges, even for one who has known monumental success. It has taken years, but Pearson is recreating his ministry in Tulsa, from offices in a downtown bank building. His young church, New Dimensions Worship Center, has no building of its own, but is reaching hundreds who are drawn to its inclusive liturgy.

“It is important that you know this: the people who are receiving me now are the people I rejected before. I was smug and arrogant. I had the big church, I had the following, I had the blessings of the likes of Billy Graham and Oral Roberts. It’s ironic – I can see the [ORU] City of Faith from my office. Indirectly, I helped build it.

“Oral and Evelyn will always be my heroes. I owe much of my life to them. They refused to stop loving me. They didn’t understand what I was preaching, but they always accepted me.

“I am Oral’s legacy or at least a significant part of it. He doesn’t know it. And it sounds arrogant for me to say it but it’s true. I’m not pursuing it. I’m assigned to it.

Carlton Pearson’s born-again ministry is growing well beyond the confines of bricks and mortar. His fall into grace has attracted national attention as media around the country pick up the story of his revelation; a movie, *The Heretic*, is being made; the church Web site receives tens of thousands of visitors. He has written a book, *The Gospel of Inclusion*, and is deeply involved in a national conference to be held in Tulsa in May: Sacred Activism and the Power of Inclusion.

Accepting his humanity while acknowledging the greatness of his mission, Pearson is following his new call to share a vision of inclusive faith in action.

“I’m Bishop Carlton Pearson, with nothing. I heard God say to me, ‘Stop building the church and be it.’” **AL**

Carlton Pearson will be a keynote speaker at the national conference, Sacred Activism and the Power of Inclusion in Tulsa, May 10-12. Visit www.wisdomuniversity.org. His book, The Gospel of Inclusion: Reaching Beyond Religious Fundamentalism to the True Love of God, is available for purchase at www.bishoppearson.com.