

## BLACK THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION: ITS CONTEXT, CONTENT AND CONDUCT

James H. Costen<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*Dr. James H. Costen, President of the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) delivered this, his Inaugural Address as the Fifth President of ITC, at Sister's Chapel, Spelman College on 20 March 1984. His speech addresses the significance of Black theological education through three interconnected sections: Context, Content and Conduct. First, in terms of Context, Dr. Costen argues that theology or "God Talk" is not performed in a vacuum, disconnected or isolated from present circumstances. Therefore, Black theological education must take into account the community's historical experience of oppression and marginalization. Second, Black theological education must see the survival of the Black Church as the content of black theological education. For Costen, the Black Church is ecumenism at its best and ITC must continue to foster and to expose this ecumenical focus to a global dimension. Finally, it is the vision of Dr. Costen that ITC conduct "the affairs of this institution in a way that every internal and external constituency will be led to support generously" the efforts being made at the ITC. The Black Churches, alumni, staff, faculty, administration, Board of Trustees and other stakeholders must financially support black theological education in order to be able to continue its vital mission.*

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. James H. Costen was President of the Interdenominational Theological Center, 1983-97. "Jim Costen was a sterling example of stewardship, leadership, and service. The ITC is extremely blessed to have had his guidance and influence for more than twenty years." *Oliver Haney, D.D.*

With the founding of Wilberforce University and Ashmun Institute, now Lincoln University, Black theological education in institutional form sprang upon the American scene with great significance. Prior to this time efforts at the general and theological education of slaves, and “free Negroes” were fragmented and whimsical, dependent upon the goodwill of a particular slaveholder or exponent of abolition. Since 1854 and the founding of these schools, seminaries and departments of religion were part of the total offerings of practically every college in America. Indeed, it was for the catechetical training of Black religious leaders that they were founded.

A recitation of prominent schools established for the theological education of Blacks would be impressive. However, it would be beyond the limits of our time today (1984). Even more impressive and time consuming would be a “parade of the great ones” who were educated in these institutions. Suffice it to say that most of America’s Black religious leadership were drawn to the breast of these schools and were nursed into personal, spiritual, and social maturity as a result of their stellar witness.

The depth and quality of education offered varied from institution to institution. Some were hardly more than Bible Schools, training their students to know and interpret the Word with precision. Some were carbon copies of the white institutions of the North and reflected the pedagogy of the white missionaries who were instrumental in their founding. Thus, the biblical languages, rhetoric, elocution, exegesis and a variety of course offerings informed the curriculum of these schools. The one thing that appeared to be common to all of these institutions and their students was a fierce determination to be free and lift brothers and sisters from the frash heaps of slavery and the ravages of discrimination.

When Interdenominational Theological Center began in 1959, there were 17 Black theological seminaries still in operation; only Gammon Seminary and Howard School of Religion were fully accredited. One of the overarching reasons for the founding of the ITC was to provide accredited, affordable theological education for a larger number of black

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students. Harry V. Richardson, the first president of the ITC and a leading exponent in its conception, said that, "...in 1958 there were only 387 Black students registered in all degree programs at schools belonging in the Association of Theological Schools."

While this number has grown dramatically to over almost 2900 today, the need for leadership that is biblically sound, theologically knowledgeable, socially sensitive and interpersonally skilled is more greatly needed today than ever before. Leadership for approximately 65,000 Black churches in the United States must be found and properly educated in greater numbers. This is the challenge facing ITC today. This leads me to discuss the context, the content and the conduct of Black theological education.

### **The Context**

Relevant theology is never in isolation from its context. This is to say that theology, from any perspective, must be related to the present circumstances. If theology is properly defined as "God Talk," it is "God Talk" about things that are currently relevant, the bane or blessing of current life. It is not irrelevant prattling about other age or some other set of circumstances.

Having said this, however, it is necessary to go on to say that we must take full advantage of the past. There were accomplishments, learnings, and insights from the past. We need to know these things. To neglect them is to repudiate the mysterious, wonderful way God has led each generation to capture the moment. However, our task in theological education today is to hear God talking to us in this existential moment. Our task is to be receptive to God, here and now.

Last summer the Sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches met in Vancouver, British Columbia. This Assembly, which in many ways can be described as a reconciling Assembly, brought together persons from throughout the world to discuss and act upon those things that make us truly one in Jesus Christ. One of the emphases of this

Assembly was “Insights on Ecumenical Learning.” The goals for the achievement of these learnings are instructive for what I wish to share about the context of theological education. These goals are:

1. To help each other to believe in Jesus Christ as the source of life and to grow in faith as Christian persons.
2. To discover together that God has given us *ONE WORLD*
3. To participate in the struggle for global justice and peace.
4. To participate in the communities of prophetic witness.
5. To relate our local struggles to global perspectives.

Contextually, the Black Church and Black theological institutions are laboring today under heavy demands of being excellent centers of theological learning and sharing, amidst alarming surroundings. Thus, the growth and vitality of many Black Churches are waning and people are looking askance at the present relevance of the church in times like these. They cite the fact that one in three Blacks lives below the poverty level; that unemployment among Blacks is 18% and among Black youth it is 50%. Eleven million Americans are unsuccessfully looking for work; almost two million have grown so weary that they have stopped looking at all.

The national context in which we do our theological education is an increasingly calloused context. People are increasingly becoming less important. Our giant military-industrial machinery is growing at an alarming rate. Our current national leadership finds it logical and possible to increase our defense by \$35 billion dollars next year and finds it illogical and impossible to appropriate \$20 million to establish a National Peace Academy, an academy devoted to finding alternative ways to deal with human conflict. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we were as committed to “waging peace” as we are to waging war?

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Vancouver reminds us that we are part of one world. Christians and nonbelievers in other parts of the world must figure into our theological equation. The opportunity is great to make a witness that just might help break the cycle of hopelessness that exists. It is said that by the year 2000, 393 million Christians will live in Africa alone. By that year the majority of the world's Christians will live in Africa, Asia, Latin and Central America. While this citation might smack Christian triumphalism, it has a stark and sobering reality about it that addresses Black Americans and others with great challenge and profundity. The message is that these teeming masses are the "have-nots" of the world, and yet the Christian church's greatest growth is among these "despised and rejected." Doesn't the Bible talk about raising up stones to praise God's name?

Some years ago the journal, *Church and Society*, came out with some startling statistics. Let me share them with you:

Compress the world into a global village of 100 people, and 70 of them will be unable to read. Only 1 will have a college education. Fifty will be suffering from malnutrition and 80 will be found living in housing unfit for human habitation. In this same village of 100, six would be Americans who would have one-half of the entire income of the village, leaving the remaining 94 to exist on the other 50%. In such circumstance, the wealthy of the village could only live "in peace" with their neighbors by arming themselves against the other 94.

ITC's mission is to prepare men and women to minister effectively in a national and world context similar to what I have described above. While it is true, and I heartily affirm this truth, that ITC must prepare persons for any ministerial station, it is a greater reality that its graduates will serve the poorest of the poor, the modern day "despised and rejected."

Let's not fool ourselves about the extent of our progress. Much of Black America is less well off today than in our past. Our task, yes our mandate, is to provide and

educational climate at the ITC that acquaints students with these facts of life. We must help them, drawing on every biblical and social vestige of hope, to keep themselves and those they serve from sinking further into the pits of despair. Black theological education, in addition to its irreducible need to provide a sound classical theological framework for its community of learners, must also be centers lifting the fallen, inspiring the rejected, strengthening the weakened, educating the hopeless. These institutions must help people appreciate the sacred by moving them with skill and compassion through the secular to see God's will and love for them. How this is done is what I call the *Content of Black Theological Education*. Let us move now to the discussion.

## The Content

Theological education from the Black perspective is not just one among many directions in theological education today. Black theological education has to do with the survival of the Black Church and the Black community. The extent to which it takes seriously this specialized assignment is the extent to which it can make its greatest contribution to itself and society in general.

Dr. Frank T. Wilson<sup>2</sup>, who you have just met as the person who introduced me, in characteristic fashion has given us the backdrop for our discussion of the imperative content of Black theological education. Writing in *Periscope II*, a journal highlighting 175 years of Black Presbyterianism, Dr. Wilson the journal's editor, stated:

The black presence, perspective and participation in the total mission of the whole church will move into dimensions without boundaries or limitations as black membership and leadership in church move:

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<sup>2</sup> Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary became the fifth institution to join ITC in academic year 1969-1970 under the leadership of Rev. Frank T. Wilson.

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from grateful recipients to self-reliant contributors

from faithful functionaries to resourceful practitioners

from crafty verbalizers to committed craftpersons

from comfortable conformist to creative catalyst

from ruffled reactors to forceful initiators

As we design and become the embodiment of our curriculum, we want our students to know their past, its strengths and weaknesses. We want them to drink deeply from the fountains of general knowledge. Our role is not to produce separatist of Black bigots. Our role is to produce men and women who can articulate in clear voice and mind their certainty that God has brought them “through many danger, toils and snares.” However, their education must also help them sift through the fact that Black people supplied more than an appetite at the table of building this country. They were participants! We seek to move them in mind and spirit from “grateful recipients to self-reliant contributors.”

It's not enough just to know the polity of one's church (in our case six polities). Polity, or church governance, is designed to steer us through the booby traps of ecclesiastical structures. Its value is its usefulness in bringing about greater love for the church and health in its body. It is not for maneuvering into position for greater acclaim. Here at ITC we want to prepare men and women who love the church and are willing to serve the church. Our aim is to weed out the prima donnas and to place greater emphasis on servanthood, persons willing to share God's love in compassionate ways. Thus, we seek to move from “faithful functionaries to resourceful practitioners.”

Increasingly, there is a greater ability in the Black Church to detect the difference between those who are merely

skilled in communication and those whose whole being is wrapped up in the well-being of the people they serve. They can detect those who cloak their selfish desires in flowing, grammatically impeccable language. At the ITC we will seek to recruit, educate, and offer for placement students who are personally and intellectually honest, possessing integrity of the highest order, driven by a love for industry, and compelled and committed to Jesus Christ as Lord. Then, we will produce a cadre of religious leaders who have moved from “crafty verbalizers to committed craftpersons.”

Theological education worth its salt in the Black community today must address the frontier issues affecting the survival of a people. It cannot be cloistered, ivory-towered, and hypothetical. On the contrary, it must be relevant, consistent, engaging, confrontative, and possessing the forceful warmth of Jesus Christ. We must equip students to know the difference between legislation designed to buoy the human spirit and legislation cloaking itself as religious because we offer a time for prayer in public schools. We propose to offer an education here that will create in our students a love for justice and righteousness, an education that inspires one to risk and dare knowing that risk and daring are basic to the Christian life. We will rekindle fervor, characteristic of our ecclesiastical forebears, to be harbingers of hope and dispensers of faith. This is not an easy educational goal, but it is a necessary goal. Only by adopting such a goal can we move from being “comfortable conformists to creative catalyst.”

It is my fervent belief that ITC offers the theological community, here and elsewhere, one of its most outstanding examples of ecumenical contextualization. By this I mean that ITC is one of the world's best examples of a working ecumenicity, a deliberate effort to be one. To be sure, this kind of ecumenical endeavor has its problems, however, the opportunities far outweigh the problems. Were it not in existence it would have to be created. Where else in the world do you have six denominations cooperating in a single program of theological education?

We are the largest and most ecumenical predominantly Black theological institutions in the world. I am of the opinion



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that we have much to offer the broader society. I believe that we can offer a theology of suffering that leads to an active involvement in the midst of suffering. Ours can be a contribution to urban life in America. From these walls can come persons and documentation attuned to Third World life and thought. ITC can move us toward a global perspective of ministry. We can help develop a new understanding of ecclesiology, a concept sadly lacking today. We can assist the Black Church move from being “ruffled reactors to forceful initiators.”

The achievement of these goals will require a faculty, student body, administration and staff committed to living out our lives on tiptoes, poised to respond to the groans from the “have” and the “have-nots.” What we offer here must be open to God’s fresh and freeing interventions.

We have talked about the context of a Black theological education today. Now, let us turn our attention to the *conduct* of this educational thrust. How is it to be carried out?

### **Conduct**

Black institutions of higher learning began in less than auspicious circumstances. Under brush arbors, in railway boxcars, church basements, lodge halls, and in minister’s home; these schools got their start. They struggled to come into being on the strength of persons with undaunted dreams to educate a race of people days removed from the world’s most dastardly example of human servitude. Whether by the all-giving support of Black men and women, or the sacrificial and benevolent work of white missionaries from the North, these schools clawed out an existence and met a great need, the education of indigenous leadership.

Following in the noble tradition of the past, our unflagging efforts at the ITC will be to conduct an administration that is efficiently run, fiscally sound and accountable. Faculty, staff, and students will be challenged constantly and assisted to stand tall in their roles as teachers, supporters and learners. Governance will be provided the kind

of information required to do credible and consistent work. We will attempt to conduct the affairs of this institution in a way that every internal and external constituency will be led to support generously the efforts being made.

There are over three thousand living graduates of the denominational schools comprising of the ITC. These men and women are working in every state of the union and every continent, with the possible exception of Antarctica. They are prominently involved as pastors, bishops, chaplains, teachers, bureaucrats of every type at every level. Graduates from this visionary institution are giving visionary leadership throughout the world.

As I begin my ministry as president of this institution, I want it to be known that I am proud of the accomplishments of our graduates. It will be my full-time effort to find them, inform them, promote them and to provide for their life-long education.

In the same manner and with equal zeal, I will ask for their sacrificial financial support for the ITC and its constituent seminaries. Through our Department of Institutional Advancement, each alumni/ae will be encouraged to give regularly and sacrificially to support this institution. ITC is too precious, too possessing of potential to limp along on a shoestring. Every graduate will be challenged to give to their alma mater. The time is now, the need is now. There is no greater impetus to the conduct of strong theological education than to have the support of those who have been beneficiaries of its educational mission.

Similarly, it is in the best interest of corporations, industries, foundations, and philanthropic individuals to provide sufficient financial support for the ITC and other predominantly black theological institutions. Leadership serving over 53% of all Black Americans comes from this single institution. We need to make doubly sure that these men and women have the best possible classical and specialized education.

In addition to what a student can receive elsewhere, our students, need to be skilled in crisis-intervention; they must be job seekers, community organizers, commercial and industrial mediators, art curators, marital counselors and they

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must provide a host of other special services required to serve the Black Church and community.

The quality of life in teeming American cities and in remote rural hamlets will depend, in large measure, on what happens here at the ITC. Therefore, I unabashedly call on foundations, large and small, churches, corporations and concerned individuals to invest in a holistic program of theological education and in a theological product having a holistic understanding of God's call to ministry.

It is the commitment of the ITC Board of Trustees, faculty, alumni, staff, and administration to conduct here an outstanding program of theological education. This resolve will require commensurate support from Atlanta and communities around the world. I challenge you to allow us to conduct a program of education that will serve the needs of much of the Third World. I challenge you to assist us to conduct a ministry here that will advance the evangelical and renewal efforts so badly needed in Protestant America. I challenge you to assist us to assist you.