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THE CHALLENGE OF HISTORICALLY BLACK INSTITUTIONS IN LIGHT OF THE TASK OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

When I was teaching at Hampton University, Tony Brown made a profound statement several years ago at a Founders' Day event. He said that one of the central keys to success is that one must learn to become necessary. He was using the standard, logical context of a condition being necessary as opposed to a condition being sufficient. Historically, Black Colleges and Universities must remain a necessary condition to the antecedent of African American success in particular and to American and global success in general. Drawing an analogical similarity to the Historically Black Theological Schools, I contend that in order for Historically Black Theological Schools to become successful and survive, they must become a necessary condition to the antecedent of the success of the African American Church in particular and to the Church Universal in general.

In the laws of logic and according to the standard rules of reason, a necessary condition is defined in the following way. A condition is deemed to be necessary if the negation of that condition automatically negates the antecedent that stands in a conditional or hypothetical relationship with it. That being the case, then it will logically follow that if the Historically Black Theological Schools are a necessary condition to the African

⁵⁷ This paper was delivered in 2008 at the annual meeting of the Association of Theological Schools in the US and Canada by Dr. Michael A. Battle, president of the Interdenominational Theological Center, 2003-2009.

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American Church surviving in particular, and the Church Universal surviving in general, then the negation of the Historically Black Theological Schools will automatically negate the possibility of the African American Church being successful in particular and the Church Universal being successful in general.

The challenge of the Historically Black Theological Schools is to become necessary to the success of the Church. The intervening reality; however, is that they have not yet become necessary. And because of that intervening reality, there is a sense of exigency on the part of the Historically Black Theological Schools (HBTS) to become necessary.

I am not suggesting that the HBTS are not needed; nor am I suggesting that they are not “needful.” But I am suggesting that they are not a necessary condition to the survival of the African American Church and the Church Universal.

If it were the case that the HBTS were a necessary condition, then its negation would negate the success of the African American Church. There is too much evidence of success in the African American Church without the HBTS having anything to do with making that success, to claim status as a necessary condition. In fact, it is the case—and I’ll use the inclusive possessive plural that we are not yet necessary. We must, however, become necessary.

The only denomination in the African American Church that has made us necessary to its survival is the AME Church. The AME Zion Church, the CME Church, none of the four Black Baptist denominations, the Church of God in Christ, none of the Apostolic Pentecostal Black Churches, and none of the Independent Black Churches have made us necessary. In fact, to some of them, not only are we not necessary to their survival, we

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are prohibitory to their survival and are deemed to be problematic and not deemed to be an asset.

I contend that the Historically Black Theological Schools do make a critical difference— that we do add a significant amount to the formal education of the Church, and that our products (graduates) are actively involved in the process of making the Church better. But there is a perception that we are the antithesis of progress, in part because the Church in general and the African American Church in particular sometimes sees what we do in theological education to be antithetical to the cause of the Christ upon which the Church stands, and the foundation that the Church claims as its own.

In our process of being intellectual, in our process of being critical, in our process of deconstructing the faith that some students bring to our institutions, we have become so absorbed in the deconstruction process that we have forgotten that it is a tragic error to tear down anybody's presuppositions without participating with them in building foundations for a new set of presuppositions to emerge by the time they leave our institutions. And, thus it is the case, as John Kinney said the other day – reference Jeremiah Wright – that after preaching an erudite sermon that probably would have gotten him a good grade in seminary class, a person came to him and said, “I didn't need that (expletive deleted) that you gave to me today.”

We must learn how to become necessary to the Church. And the way we become necessary to the Church is by doing a better job than anyone else in preparing women and men who will equip the saints—who will go forth from our seminaries not just as great preachers but as persons who equip the saints. You don't have to go to seminary to be a great preacher. If you don't believe it, don't go to your church on Sunday morning. Go to one of the churches where there is somebody who has never been inside a

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seminary and listen to some of their sermons, and you will discover that many of those sermons are not only well put together and homiletically sound, they are hermeneutically sound, and they're biblically solid. And then at the end of the day, people are actually saved after hearing the preaching.

We must do a better job of training people how to go forth into the Churches that they serve and the classrooms in which they teach and equip the people of God in the way that will indicate that the person doing the equipping has been equipped by the Christ who equipped His disciples. You cannot go back to that point unless in your equipping you demonstrate that you have a personal relationship with Christ. We must do a better job in spiritual formation if we are going to be necessary to the Church. Not only in terms of understanding the theoretical framework of spiritual formation and understanding how to design spiritual formation, and understanding how to distinguish one form of formation from another form of formation; we must demonstrate that we have had a personal relationship with the Christ upon whom the Church is founded and upon whom the Church is ultimately and absolutely dependent.

We must not wait until the Church sees us as being necessary, we must create the reality of our necessity. Tony Brown was saying that we must create the condition of being necessary. In order to create the condition of being necessary, we must understand the Church. We must understand what the Church needs, how the Church needs it, what the needs of the laity of the Church are, and what the need of the hierarchy of the Church is simultaneously. If we understand what the laity needs and do not understand what the judicatory heads need, we have understood only half the task. And if we understand what the judicatory heads need and don't understand what the laity needs, we are still half-witted in our understanding of what the Church needs. We have to

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understand the needs of the Church, and we cannot wait until the Church meets us halfway.

Sometimes in our arrogance, we have felt that what we have to offer is so wonderful and so great that the Church ought to meet us half way. We ought to go 99 per cent of the way and engage the Church where the Church is. The Church has already proven it can survive without us. We are not necessary to the Church; however, the Church is a necessary condition for theological seminaries. If you negate the Church, you automatically negate the need for theological seminaries. Who else is going to support a seminary if there's no Church? Because the negation of the Church has the capacity to negate the HBTS, we ought to be the ones on the aggressive side. We ought to be the ones making the first steps. We ought to be the initiators in the discussion between us and the Church and not wait for the Church to come to us. We ought to be those who are proactive. We ought to be the ones who are engaging. We ought to be the ones talking to the Church and explaining to the Church why we are so valuable and we ought to do all we can to help the Church to understand and appreciate the value that we give.

Let me suggest a few other ways that we can become necessary. We can become necessary by intentionally educating our students to be life-long and continual educators of other people. If we produce graduates who, after graduating from seminary, stop reading, stop learning, stop writing, and stop preparing, then we have failed to meet the needs of the next generation. At a theological advisory committee for the Progressive National Baptist Convention, one of the lay persons said, "There is a great desire in the Church for ministers who are not only capable, but who are willing to spend time equipping and empowering the laity to understand and to do ministry. This person—a well-educated person with a Ph.D., and who had been

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an educator for a number of years—said that she wanted to see ministers who were willing to help create a trained laity.

A young minister in Atlanta called me about six or seven months ago and said to me, “Doc., I’m having a problem.” I said, “What’s the problem?” He said, “Last Sunday we were dealing with the questions of HIV and AIDS and how God wrestles with HIV and AIDS, and people were asking me scientific questions.” He said, “I don’t have the answers, but I feel as a minister I need to answer the questions.” I said, “Man, what in the world makes you think that because you’re a minister you ought to know medicine?” Then, I said, “Why don’t you say to the congregation, ‘I really can’t answer that question; but, maybe if we bring some doctors and nurses in, we can have a discussion?’” We must equip our students to work with the vast resources in the laity; to see their gifts and to assist in the development of those gifts. This is what will make the difference between a seminary-trained clergy person and a person who is not seminary trained. The Church has got to see that there is market value to a seminary-educated minister in terms of his/her capacity to do a better job for the Church in the final analysis.

There is another trend in the African American Church. Dr. Edward P. Wimberly⁵⁸ mentioned in a presentation that African American Churches are reaching a point that there is a more educated laity, and thus they are looking for a more educated clergy, but not necessarily in theology. Look in your town at the number of persons pastoring significant Black churches who have a Masters in Psychology, a Masters in Education, a Masters in Business Administration, or a Ph.D. in some area of science.

⁵⁸ Dr. Edward Wimberly is the vice president of academic services/provost and professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling at the Interdenominational Theological Center.

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Churches are calling people that they appreciate for their experience in learning, but they are not necessarily calling people who have theological learning. The HBTS have to show that there is a distinct difference that a theologically trained person can make. We have to market what we produce. And we have to be able to demonstrate the market value of the persons we graduate. The way we demonstrate the market value of the persons we produce is by preparing them in such a way that they are more marketable than other persons who do not have a seminary education.

There is an illusion that sometimes occurs in seminary—hopefully not at ITC and at any seminary that I can remember. But there are some people who learn—unfortunately in seminary dialogue—that the minister is just another person and that it is unfair for people to expect a minister to live a life of a higher standard than the laity. That it is not right, that it is inappropriate to expect ministers to actually live right, because they are just human. Bishop John R. Bryant said—in a sermon presented several years ago—that “Not only does the Church have a right to expect that a minister lives a life of a higher standard, but God has a right to expect the same.” We have to graduate men and women who are bold enough and courageous enough to actually want to live right.

A recent graduate from ITC was called to a church that I knew very well. I knew the previous pastor extremely well. This newly appointed pastor told me the name of the church. And I said to him, “When you take that church, do everything you can to live holy, because that was a church that had been abused by a seminary-trained minister who did not live holy.” And I said to him that a testimony to ITC as well as to God would be in his capacity to go to that church and demonstrate to the best of his ability holy living. I wouldn’t say to him that he had to be perfect.

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But he had an obligation to ITC to live a life that was exemplary of what we try to teach at ITC.

When our graduates go out and take churches and don't do what they ought to do in those churches, it makes it not only more difficult for that Church to call another graduate from that seminary, but it cushions the people in the Church who say, "You don't need those seminary people, anyway. They don't know how to live for God. They don't talk about sanctification. They don't know anything about holiness. They don't even bother to live right! All you have to understand is the theoretical understanding of Who and What God is. You don't really have to know God in a personal way. Come on, that went out a long time ago. And today people don't talk about personal relationships with Jesus Christ."

In order to be necessary to the Church, we've got to talk about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. And if we don't affirm that Jesus Christ is Lord, and cannot affirm that Jesus Christ did die for our sins, then why be at seminary? Just be at a place to study religion? The seminary ultimately exists to serve the Church, and the Church needs people who believe in Jesus. And not people who believe in Jesus as one of the multiple options, but who believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior. While we can embrace the reality that there are other approaches to salvation, at the end of the day the Church proclaims the message of Jesus who said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life."⁵⁹ And we will proclaim that with power and with conviction. In order to be necessary, we have to go back to the foundation of teaching people to equip other people to believe that Jesus indeed is Savior.

Sometimes professors come to class to teach their issues. Their issues aren't necessarily the issues that the people we're

⁵⁹ John 14:6.

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training want to hear or even need to hear. I think we need to be very intentional about getting to know the Church. Can you imagine a medical school that had no real intentional relationship with hospitals? And a medical school where nobody in the medical school has spent any time in an emergency room over the last 15-20 years. You would probably have an ineffective medical school program. Or a law school where none of its orientation dealt with the practical aspects of the law. The theological seminary should be immersed in the life of the Church and should invite the life of the Church to its campus and at its location. We have been trying to do that at ITC. We volunteered on a number of instances to host occasions where community-oriented groups will come to us to meet with preachers to talk about how we can better be engaged with community. A disconnect between us and the Church is our liability, not the Church's liability. For those of you who took Logic, you know you have this thing, if P, then Q. And then there is this conditional, hypothetical arrangement: P is the antecedent, then Q is the consequent, and P has to be a sufficient condition for the survival of Q, and Q has to be a necessary condition for the survival of P.

Now if I really want to push the claim, what we really need to create is a condition of bi-conditionality which says, P if and only if Q, which then means that P is both necessary and sufficient for Q, and Q is both necessary and sufficient for P. It all indicates that the Church is both necessary and sufficient for the seminary, and the seminary is both necessary and sufficient for the Church. But because we haven't even arrived at necessity, we certainly can't claim sufficiency, because sufficiency would mean that as a standard or condition on its own it is enough to guarantee the survival of the Church. I don't think anybody is foolish enough to presuppose that the presence of a seminary in isolation to any other condition can guarantee the survival of the Church. It simply cannot. So certainly we are not a sufficient condition, but we ought

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to at least aim to be necessary. And, again, I am not saying we are not needful; we are needful. We are needed. But we have not yet arrived at the point that we are a necessary condition. A good sign would be the major branches of the African American Church prescribing seminary education as a prerequisite for ordination.

I would presuppose that the AME Zion and the CME Churches may be the next behind the AME Church. It will be a long, long time before the Church of God in Christ and the Baptist Church reach that point.

Questions may be raised: What is the nature of partnership between seminary and Church? What is the seminary doing to address the Church's pain? We see ourselves in the seminary as wanting to minister to the Church's pain. But I so often realize that the people who come to seminary bring their own baggage, their own stuff with them to seminary. Instead of concentrating on teaching them the fundamentals of ministry, we at the same time, help them to deal with their own "stuff."

Let me explain what I see as the Church's pain. The pain that the Church has experienced—the laity of the Church and part of the frustration the leadership of the Church has experienced—is a disconnect between the academic revolution that often happens in the seminary and the practical on-the-ground needs where people and their lives are demonstrated day by day. Another part of the pain is the notion that sometimes the seminary presents itself as being smarter than the Church, superior to the Church, better than the Church. And so you have ministers who have not gone to seminary but are doing incredible work having the value of their work lessened simply because they have not gone to seminary.

You know how people react to things. Sometimes we react to pain by denigrating the source of our pain or what we think is

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the causation of our pain. So, then, what happens is that we have ministers with successful ministries and churches with successful ministers that turn part of the internalized pain against the seminary and say it is the cemetery. It is the place where learning takes place but burning dies out.

Many times people who make statements like that are actually begging for conversation, and begging for recognition and acceptance. I remember a minister in Chicago—serving a brilliant church—a learned man in the non-formal way of being learned. But because he had non-formal learning and his capacity to enunciate was not great, and his verb-subject agreement was not always in line, those who were formally learned placed him to the rear. People who were members of his church, who felt that their souls were being regularly fed by him and that their lives were being sustained by him, acted out their pain by disregarding people who have theological education. The burden is on us to go and have conversation and to include in conversation the minister whose grammar is not correct, and have discussion about ways we can help them articulate.

When I was in undergraduate school in Hartford, Connecticut, I worked for a local church, and also taught a GED⁶⁰ program four nights a week. I did it because I was at a very wealthy White undergraduate school and I felt guilty being there. So I wanted to go back into the Black community and do something. So I taught GED. And there was a guy who came to me and said, “I want you to work with me in my preaching.” So I said, “Okay, I’ll do it. I’ll volunteer to work with you.” (I wasn’t going to work with him in his preaching because I hadn’t gone to seminary yet; I was still in undergraduate school.) But preaching was not his problem. The guy could preach rings around me when

⁶⁰ General Education Development that is equivalent to a High School diploma

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he was asleep and I was wide awake. But what he needed most from me was a set of lessons on where to put an “s” and where not to put an “s.” What was plural and what was not plural. And so we spent Saturday after Saturday working on grammar. He eventually became a bishop in his denomination. But he spoke better as a bishop. He regarded theological education, not because he had one, but because somebody who was in the process of going for a theological education regarded him as significant and worked with him in that significant regard. So he was not hurt; he was not in pain.

Franklin Richardson, who was the General Secretary for the National Baptist Convention, was preaching a sermon at the installation of Jeannette Wilson, who became the new dean of the Doctor of Ministry Program at United Theological Seminary. His sermon raised the question, “What is there that the Doctor of Ministry is expected to be able to do that no other doctorate can do?” And he used the parable about when the disciples of Jesus could not help the wounded person who later went to Jesus and said, “Why couldn’t your disciples do this?” What he was saying is that seminary education prepares you to do something that nobody else on the face of the earth can do. That is to be able to offer wholeness and well-being to persons broken by pain.

Last week I was on a teleconference/press conference with the president of Morehouse School of Medicine, the president of the National Black Nurses Association, the president of the Latino Medical Association, and the president of the Urban League, and about four or five other people. The only seminary there was ITC, and the reason we were at the table was Health and Human Services said that emotional healing—they wouldn’t let us use the term “spiritual healing”—is necessary to holistic healing. They said that a theologically trained person is necessary to carry out the

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equipping of emotional healers. Health and Human Services sees theological education as necessary.

Can you imagine what would happen if we could help the churches to see us as necessary? They would give more money. They would call on us for guidance. They would call on us for direction. And every time the church got ready to do something, it would call the local theological seminary and say, “We’re getting ready to do something, what do you think about it?” They cannot do that, however, if they think that we are going to be the Sadducees and Pharisees and rent our holy garments and look down at the Church. Who are we fooling? We are not necessary to them; they are necessary to us.

A member of the audience made this comment. “Of importance in theological education is how we define ourselves. Our conception is that we are servants of the Church. I am a servant of the AME⁶¹ denomination. As a servant of the Church, therefore, I have to know this body that I am serving. And although I am president of a seminary, I would not say that I have all the wisdom yet that I need. Being a servant opens us up to being a learner, which challenges the idea of superiority. And all of this leads me to believe we need to call ourselves—not preachers—but pastors. I think it is the pastoral witness that might be missing for us as a people. So no matter what your ministry is, you need to offer a pastoral presence to the person who is before you; a pastoral presence to the human need; a pastoral presence to the human condition, and you must serve that person not only with a body discipline and witness, but you must serve them pastorally.”

⁶¹ African Methodist Episcopal Church

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My response is that I agree with you. And there's one step to push it. What we are called to do is a lot less significant than how we demonstrate service. We have to demonstrate the pastoral spirit. I would also push it just a little bit. There probably are students at Payne Theological Seminary who are not AME. That being the case, your immediate obligation is to the AME Church. But so close to that immediate obligation, as almost to be indistinguishable from that immediate obligation, is your obligation to the whole of the Church regardless of denomination.

There was another comment from the floor: "It bothers me that we refer to our students as 'products.' The minute we talk about selling students and market rates, we define a condition that I think we need to be careful of. Instead of selling students, we should be equipping the saints for ministry. I realize it's a question of semantics, but it really bothers me to be talking about selling students rather than equipping the saints for ministry. Insofar as we are witnessing to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, there will be times when seminaries need to call the Church to do right. Not because we are superior; but because we, too, are the Church. We, too, are called in a vocation of the ministry of the Word of Salvation."

My response: But the way we call the Church to do right is the same way the Church—when it is faithful—calls us to do right. And it's a scenario that when anyone has sinned, the one who deems herself or himself to be right or righteous should restore that one in a spirit of meekness. So, the fact of the pain experienced by the Church heightens our responsibility to initiate the discussion about healing and wellness.

What happens, however, sometimes—certainly not at ITC or at any of the seminaries here—is that we spend time in the seminary talking about the sins of the Church so much that the people we are educating to equip the saints go out to equip the saints with an antagonistic attitude about the saints. So, while we

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talk about all the stuff that the Church is still doing wrong, we have to instill in our students that urgency to work with the Church to make the Church better. Because, with all of its error, the institutional Church remains—particularly for African American people—the most stable bridge we have ever had and probably will ever have.

After Katrina, Dr. Willie Goodman and Dr. Carolyn McCrary, both professors of Pastoral Care and Counseling at ITC, wrote a pastoral letter and emailed it to everybody at ITC: to students, faculty, staff and administration. In that pastoral letter they talked about how we become healed in the process of being healers. That is the attitude and disposition we should take with the Church. How do we help the Church heal, while at the same time we are also being healed by the Church? When that happens, I think it will be a wonderful thing. But we always have to initiate the discussion about the healing. The Church has done a lot of horrible, horrible, horrible, horrible things, like justifying slavery and, recently, defending the atrocity in Iraq. The Church played a role in sanctifying the war in Iraq, and the prophets of the Church need to rise up and say that this nation does not have the cleanness of heart to be the instrument of God's judgment against any other nation. And those who claim that God is using us to judge, we ought to look at our own hands. If anything, the Iraq situation just might become the instrument of God's judgment of us, because we went in with dirty hands. You can't wash my hands if your hands are filthy. So, if you're going to wash my hands, wash them with clean hands.

Comment: "There is a good deal of discussion about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and then believing that Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins. Those terms are language that I, in my personal spirituality, do not use or am not appreciative of."

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Response: As I am speaking now and making this presentation, I am not suggesting to you that what I am saying is the philosophical position that ITC takes as an institution. These are certainly my ideas. This is the foundation from which I preach. Living holy simply means living the way you and your denomination feel God calls you to live, whether you use the term “live holy” or not. For me, I am very comfortable with the notion of living holy because in the back of my mind I know both the lexical definition and the stipulative definition that I give to the term; so I’m okay with it. And if a “personal relationship with Jesus” and “Jesus died for your sins” is not language that you use, don’t use it because then you’re not being authentic. But for those for whom it is authentic, keep using this language with power and conviction and keep on rolling.