



Leonard Lovett*

NEITHER DID THEY ARRIVE EMPTY:
LEADERSHIP AND SOCIAL ACTION:
AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

“ . . .when you go, you shall not go empty.”
Exodus 3:21

Introduction

Slaves were brought to America primarily to fulfill the economic void for labor. However, they did not come empty. Among the enslaved were priests, and when priests are present so is religion. African-Americans were systematically denied not only social equality but also ordinary legal rights of American citizens.

Black-Holiness Pentecostalism is not a denomination but rather a movement encompassing several bodies supporting belief in a spirit baptism, accompanied by various signs including speaking in tongues, with historic roots embracing but not always restricted to both a Wesleyan Armenian and completed work of Calvary orientation. They, too, believe that the baptism in the Holy Spirit is a post-conversionary experience, normative and available to all Christians to be a more effective witness in carrying out the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19).

Black-Holiness Pentecostalism

Perhaps more than any other twentieth-century religious movement in the West, Black-Holiness Pentecostalism holds the

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distinction of being a significant catalyst and spawning ground for scores of denominations, including the charismatic renewal—all emphasizing the centrality of the Holy Spirit. So little attention had been given to Black-Holiness Pentecostalism by historians that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, while visiting the United States from Germany, referred to them as the “stepchildren of modern church history.” Early Black-Holiness Pentecostalism pioneers, while often sequestered from the view of even major American-church historians and beyond Azusa Street (commonly regarded by many as the genesis of contemporary Pentecostalism), have spoken to our time and deserve their rightful place in American Christianity.

Black-Holiness Pentecostalism was born amidst the fleeting shadows of slavery in America. The movement encompasses those Black religious groups whose leadership developed primarily from established mainline Black Protestant denominations between 1885 and 1916. The genesis of Black-Holiness Pentecostalism occurred approximately twenty-five years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, some fifteen years before the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and parallel to the ascendancy of the illustrious Booker T. Washington, noted Black educator.

While the significance of African survivals within Black religion in the New World has been much debated among anthropologists, sociologists, and historians, it appears that Black-Holiness Pentecostalism shares the legacy of Black-slave religion, whose historic roots are anchored deep in African and Afro-Caribbean religion. It should be noted that it is primarily in worship form, religious expression and lifestyle, rather than a codified belief system that Black-Holiness Pentecostalism shares in the rich legacy of Black slave religion. Since most of the first slaves brought to the American colonies came from the Antillean

subregion, it is quite possible that some had already made a partial transition from their native religions to Christianity prior to any systematic evangelization on the mainland. It was from slave religion that a "Black style" of worship developed in an unstructured way as Black slaves encountered the almighty God of their forebears.

African Survivals and Black Religion

The degree to which these Christianizing influences modified slave religion is debated, requiring a more detailed treatment. While slaves were uneducated in terms of Western standards and cultural ethos, their ancestral religions and the religious consciousness engendered were complex. Specific religious beliefs salvaged from Africa often came under vigorous assault by Protestant missionaries. It was the slaves' adaptation to Christianity without being completely divested of one's native religious "worship style" which later was significant in its impact upon Black religious lifestyle.

Carter E. Woodson, a prominent Black historian reminded us several decades ago of the affinity of African religion with the Hebraic background of Christianity, pointing to the fact that the African stories of creation and belief in the unity of God paralleled Christian theology. He contended that there was so much affinity between the two traditions that about the only changes that the Black slave made was to label as Christian what was practiced in Africa. The resolution of the issue with regard to the survival of African cultured ethos is decisive for Black Pentecostalism.

The survival of African influence was debated by E. Franklin Frazier, a prominent Black sociologist who contended for a sharp break with the African past. He argued that due to the emascu-

lating process of chattel slavery, Blacks brought to America were completely stripped of all vestiges of their African past. Frazier focused his attention upon two basic institutions of the Black community: family and church. He noted that nothing remains of the customs, hopes, and fears of the Black community in relation to their forebears in Africa. However, once the Black family was destroyed, it was the Christian faith rather than vestiges of African culture or religious experience that provided a new basis of social cohesion for slaves.

A counter response to Frazier's view was presented by Melville J. Herskovits, the renowned cultural anthropologist, who argued a case for the slaves' continuity with the African past. In his study of human behavior among large segments of persons undergoing acculturative change, it was difficult to distinguish between form and meaning. He observed that as persons moved from one culture to a new one, there was a tendency to adopt new forms more readily than new meanings.

However, during the acculturation process, form changes more readily than meaning. Herskovits concluded that during this process, persons characteristically assign old meanings to new forms, thereby maintaining their pre-existing systems of values, making the break with established custom minimal as far as cognitive responses are concerned. On the emotional level, persons tend to retain the satisfaction derived from earlier ways, while adopting new forms that seem advantageous. Both viewpoints have their own value and enrich each other, fostering the continuing discussion relative to African survival in the New World.

Only as Black slaves were able to co-op the outward practices of slave masters and interpret them in terms of their African culture, did they discover genuine spiritual meaning and religious vitality? During the long trek of slavery, the freedom to

worship provided slaves the best avenue of meaningful expression when other ways were closed. Under such conditions, slaves developed a strong, simple faith permeated with ample superstition from their African past. Such conditions also provided fertile soil for the birth, growth, and development of a much later phenomenon known as Black-Holiness sects.

It has been cogently argued that where European practices were relatively weak, the opportunities for African survivals were correspondingly strengthened. The South was a natural habitat for the birth and development of Black-Holiness Pentecostalism. By 1836, several thousand slaves were taken into Texas annually. The presence of hostile white power and the early closing of the slave trade did much to crush the specific African religious memory, but not annihilate it. They did not come empty.

Opposition to Racism

The spirit of religious individualism soon found its true expression in the emergence of Black independent Protestant churches. This trend had begun in the eighteenth century with such notable ecclesiastical leaders as Richard Allen, James Varick, Peter Williams, George Collins, and Christopher Rush. Long before "public policy" and "social action" were in vogue, Black leaders were suspect of a God who would allow discrimination practiced at the altar where converts received Christ. The precedent was set with Richard Allen, who formed the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816, and Absalom Jones founded the St. Thomas Protestant Episcopal Church in 1794—the year Allen established "Mother Bethel" in Philadelphia to protest against white racism and discrimination in the Body of Christ. They did not

come empty.

The writer, during his doctoral studies at Emory University, wrote a paper entitled "Richard Allen: The First Black Apostle of Freedom," for a graduate seminar in "American Christianity." The first decades of the nineteenth century experienced spiritual upheaval. New Black churches were formed as Black leaders demonstrated their powers of leadership and decided to control their own destiny. By 1800, Peter Williams, James Varick, George Collins, and Christopher Rush had constituted a church they called "Lion" as a consequence of racial segregation. The Rev. Thomas Paul founded the First African Baptist Church in Boston by 1805 and later assisted in organizing a congregation in New York, which later became the Abyssinian Baptist Church. The First African Baptist Church in Philadelphia was founded in 1809 as a direct result of thirteen Blacks who had been dismissed from a white Baptist church. The Lombard Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia was also founded as a direct result of racial separation. The Dixwell Avenue Congregational Church was founded by Blacks in New Haven, Connecticut, by 1829.

These native and original Black churches emerged for several reasons. Some were initiated because Blacks were encouraged to form separate congregations, often under white supervision, due to the vast size of the mixed congregations. Several congregations were founded as a direct result of missionary activity. Frequent cases of blatant discrimination and the desire of Black Christians for equal privileges within mixed congregations also became the basis for separation. The disapproval by whites of Black worship and lifestyle played a major role in the separation of Blacks from mixed fellowships and the founding independent Black churches. They were suspect of people who could worship God for two hours on the Sabbath

and participate in a lynching the following day without any sense of conscience.¹

It was into this historical context that seminal figures were born, destined to give leadership to the emerging Black-Holiness Pentecostal Movement. Charles Harrison Mason was born, September 8, 1866, on a plantation known as the Prior Farm, near Memphis, Tennessee, to Jerry and Eliza Mason, who had converted to the Christian faith. Mason, destined to found the Church of God in Christ, was born in the midst of the brokenness of Post-Civil War Black existence. These Black-Holiness Pentecostal leaders were the sons of devoutly religious slaves whose African roots were deep within the Black religious tradition—one characterized by freedom and fellowship.

Opposition to Warfare

C. H. Mason, addressing the Apostolic Faith, noted that God baptized him with the Holy Ghost, and God's banner was over him in love. Religious and civil persecution began to plague Black-Holiness Pentecostal adherents. It was in the providence of God that William Joseph Seymour, a Baptist preacher with holiness affiliation, born in Louisiana around 1855, would be a catalyst to usher in twentieth-century Pentecostalism. A converted livery stable in the ghetto of Los Angeles, a former African Methodist Episcopal Church, became in God's providence a beckoning light to the world as well as a spawning ground from which virtually all Pentecostals trace their lineage.

It is known that there are at least twenty-six church bodies that trace their Pentecostal doctrine to Azusa Street. No revival prior to this outpouring bore such interracial and ecu-

¹See Kyle Haselden, *The Racial Problem in Christian Perspective* (New York: Harper & Row, [1964]).

menical fruits. Not only did persons of various races in America participate, but adherents from some fifty-three nations responded to the mighty move of the Holy Spirit.

However, a few years after this three-year revival, Black-Holiness Pentecostals found themselves suffering from within and without their celebrated enclaves: a condition of triple jeopardy—Black, poor, and Pentecostal. The harsh invectives imposed upon these early pioneers caused them to develop a worldview much closer to the reality of the world than the privileged few. Unearned suffering upon Black-Holiness Pentecostal adherents, gave them special insight into the working of the Spirit in the world. Their suffering forced them to reject the abstract god of the philosophers for a more concrete God, encountered and known at a deeply personal level—a God who was a “battle axe” in the time of trouble and a “shelter” in the time of storm.

Some 100 African Americans were lynched in 1901. By 1914, the number increased to 1,110. After the war, between 1918-1921, twenty-eight African Americans were burned, while scores of others died in cruel ways. Not only did lynching and KKK activity plague the South and other parts of the nation during the turn of the century, paranoia among governmental officials who brought pressure to anyone opposed to warfare and openly stated same. C. H. Mason, had W. B. Holt (white), and E. R. Driver, the Church of God in Christ West Coast representative with a legal background to express the church's stance to war: we oppose war and believe that killing human beings is against Christ's teaching. This remains the C.O.G.I.C. position. This affirmation affirmed loyalty to the president, the Constitution, civil laws, the flag, to magistrates and all God-given institutions, but on the other hand, forbid members to bear arms or shed blood.

The conscientious objector stance of the Church of God in

Christ set the stage for other newly formed Holiness-Pentecostal groups to follow, and follow they did. The pressures of the war brought greater stresses upon churches, openly encouraging others to disobey the draft law. *The Memphis Commercial Appeal* carried an article, April 1918, about Elder Jessie Payne, a C.O.G.I.C. pastor in Blytheville, Arkansas who was tarred and feathered as a result of seditious remarks concerning the president, the war, and a white man's war. Charles H. Mason had presented a clear message on *The Kaiser in the Light of the Scriptures* in which he condemned German militarism but was misinterpreted, when under the power of the Spirit, he admonished listeners not to trust in the power of the United States, England, France, or Germany, but trust in God. He further declared that the enemy (the devil) tried to hinder him from preaching the word of God, plotting to have white people arrest and put him in jail for several days. For all that live, the godly must suffer persecution (2 Tim. 2:12).

The impact of Mason's stance was so great on persons entering the military, that the government tried in vain to build its own case against him on fraud and conspiracy. He with other followers were subjected to a thorough and ongoing investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation to no avail. When agents confiscated Mason's briefcase for incriminating evidence, they found only a bottle of anointing oil and a handkerchief with his Bible. The United States District Court in Jackson, Mississippi, failed to render a federal grand-jury indictment of Mason and followers. The "kangaroo court" in Paris Texas, in 1918, dropped its case when the presiding judge chose not to have anything to do with him. As recent as 2005, Presiding Bishop G. E. Patterson and the General Board of the Church of God in Christ issued a joint public statement condemning our participation in the war in Iraq and the mas-

sive loss of life and resources.

Economic Instability and Spiritual Ferment

Cities in the south, west, northeast and mid-west were literally shaped by the growth of the automobile industry. This economic reality proved to be an extraordinary lure for disenfranchised, dispossessed African Americans, victims of intergenerational poverty during a period dubbed as the "Great Migrations" from the forties to the seventies. Simultaneously, urban African-American populations doubled in the mid-west (Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland), while similar trends occurred along the east coast corridor from Washington, DC to Boston. They did not come empty; they brought their religion. Several factors account for the "Great Migrations." Forced labor and political disenfranchisement were primary.

Much closer to home, several vicious race riots broke out in a number of western and northern cities. Migration from the rural south, stimulated by economic opportunities generated by warfare, increased the populations of African-American newcomers in the urban icon, often spilling over into Euro-American residential areas. Competition for jobs by African Americans demanded a measure of political influence. Add to these factors, natural disasters, floods storms, boll weevil invasion of crops, combined with massive social and economic dislocation throughout the south, set the stage for mass migrations. They brought their spirituality along; they did not come empty.

On the religious continuum, the search for spiritual assurance, religious succor, and primary relationships were problematic for the new citizens of "urbia" who were largely ignored by the bourgeois, staid, formal mainline African-American

churches. Like their earlier forbears, they perceived their rejection as a form of suffering, but not for long. Just as African-American Pentecostalism had evolved during the turn of the nineteenth-century from established African-American mainline churches, newly arrived émigrés to the city found refuge in smaller settings such as storefront churches often in the heart of the ghetto. African-American Pentecostals also inherited the ghettos of our cities; Jewish Synagogues and Catholic cathedrals were sold to African-American religious leaders often at cost as the former tenants rushed to suburbia for more space and cleaner air.

Major eastern and mid-western cities became the spawning ground for spiritual ferment for persons in search of a better life. The rapid influx of African Americans to the urban icons from the twenties through the early sixties attested to a plethora of religious sects and cults. This was the era of Father Divine, Prophet Jones, Prophet Cherry, Daddy Grace, and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, dispensing hope for despairing hurting peoples trying to improve their lot. We had been reminded decades prior to this time that the ghetto is more than a physical fact; it is also a state of mind

The rich oral culture of African-American Pentecostalism found deep and free expression in the ghetto churches. The presence of percussive instruments, drums, tambourines, guitars, pianos, washboards, and anything that could create music was welcomed as worship became the medium for release as well as spiritual nurture. Dancing in the Spirit, speaking in tongues, and other forms of behavior was symbolic of the freedom longed for and enjoyed by persons economically deprived but spiritually wealthy. They did not come empty.

The fundamental problem facing African-American Pentecostals who reside in the urban icon today is how to link the power with

the problem. During the early advent of Pentecostalism past the turn of the century, the social situation in North America was exacerbated by political uncertainty compounded by social and economic dislocation. After the Emancipation of African Americans from slavery, a consequence of the Civil War and political expediency, an economic system (sharecropping) that paralleled slavery was put in place in the south for eighty years. It was a tenant-landlord system that exploited tenants by holding out false promise confined with perennial debt. The African-American Church had earlier created mutual-aid societies to relive economic pressures among a burgeoning population and benevolent societies to help ameliorate social condition. African-American Pentecostal church mothers were precursors of social workers in the African-American community. They would visit sick homes, performing cleaning chores, cooking, praying for the sick, caring for the children, and doing whatever was necessary to correct a social situation. Indeed, they were on the cutting edge of a liberating ministry.

It may well be that the potential for liberating our cities may rest with those who have remained. We need an "angle of vision" that combines spirituality with social transformation. Once such a marriage occurs, the consequences may be astounding. African-Americans Pentecostals tend to identify with the biblical notion of empowerment (Acts 1:8). This does not take place in a vacuum. We are empowered by God for a particular purpose in the world. The Holy Spirit gives believers boldness and courage during difficult times. Such boldness is needed in facing "urban guerrillas" determined to take our streets. Add "the existence of a new poor" and of many women, children (primarily people of color), and elderly in poverty cannot be denied by the church.

From early African-American Pentecostals it is possible to

discern a paradigm for human relations with the larger society. The catalytic historic Los Angeles Azusa Street Revival guided by William Joseph Seymour, son of a third-generation slave in Louisiana, produced interracial, international, and ecumenical fruits that in time impacted the globe. Believers from the global village responded to the mighty move of the Holy Spirit and returned to various continents. The paradigm for liberation from racist bondages had been established by the Holy Spirit as God working dynamically, creating community.

Ecclesiology, Mission, and Mandate

The writer's primary mission to the Faith Community during this phase of his sojourn is to conduct Church/Leadership seminars in trans-denominational settings throughout North America and occasionally abroad. Seminars usually begin by engaging leadership with a seminal question: What is the purpose of the church? The response is usually the same. In most instances, 95 percent of participants provide scrambled responses that touch on priorities of the church, without dealing with the primary ecclesial question. Most will say "leading the lost to Christ" is the primary purpose. But this is tantamount to an army who does nothing but recruit trainees. Here is my definition: The purpose of the Church is to serve the need of the Kingdom of God as we worship the King through outreach, discipleship, stewardship, and promoting justice in the world.

Concluding Word

Within the corpus of African-American Pentecostalism is the potential for developing a theology of power. Those who engage in the transformation of the city must understand power that seeks to ameliorate the social conditions of the voiceless. A grassroots theology of power utilizing a serious theological-pneumatological discourse of the oral tradition has merit for African-American Pentecostalism and the Faith Community. Here are three suggestions:

1. Moratorium on Symbolic Leadership, Norman Kelley, *The Head Negro in Charge Syndrome: The Dead End of Black Politics*,² is a controversial critique of Black politics and intellectual leadership in America. Kelly argues that Black political culture tends to be charismatic, i.e., leadership bestowed upon the person (usually a man) who can dynamically and expressively denote the mood or the will of African Americans becomes a leader but not through democratic means. The major drawback of this leadership style is not establishing permanent institutions sustained over generations. Substantive leadership must be called from within the African-American Faith Community if we are to impact our future.
2. Recovery of Our Prophetic Witness happens when we speak truth to power by challenging the status quo in the name of the Lord. In its strongest Hebraic sense the prophet is a *nabi*, one who sets forth the claims of

²See Norman Kelley, *The Head Negro in Charge Syndrome: The Dead End of Black Politics* (New York: Nation Books, 2004).

the One sent. Walter Wink has provided a serious analysis of evil at work in the city. A must read is his trilogy: *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence*, and *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*.³ He contends that spiritual reality is at the heart of everything from photons to corporate institutions, seeing spirit as the capacity to be aware of and responsive to God: every institution, every city, every nation, every corporation, every place of worship. That an institution may place its own good above the general welfare [profit over people] it cannot escape the encompassing judgment of the One in and through and for whom it was created [Col. 1: 16]. The powers are locked into God's system and answerable to God. The powers are not intrinsically evil—only fallen. They are in principle redeemable. It means our existence is not our essence: we are, none of us, what we are meant to be. We are guilty of the sin of alienation from God, each other, nature, and our own souls. However, the situation is not without hope. We may pollute our water supply and the air we breathe with no concern for the future. But there comes a point of irreversibility when the toxic wastes we dump become our own drink and the air we breathe becomes loaded with carcinogens.

A group is needed (what the N.T. calls an *ekklesia*

³See Walter Wink, [his trilogy], *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998); *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986); and *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

[assembly]) to recall the powers to their created purpose—divine vocation. This is the task of the church. So that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (Ephesians 3:10). Wink contends that the church must perform this task despite its being as fallen and idolatrous as any other institution in society. It is incumbent upon Black religious leadership to deal with one's idols and demons and recover our prophetic witness. Repentance and re-prioritizing our agenda is mandatory.

3. Transformative Social Witness: Any attempt to engage in social transformation should be grounded in authentic spirituality. Over three decades from within these walls at ITC, "authentic liberation" cannot occur without a genuine encounter with the Holy Spirit, likewise one cannot have a genuine encounter with the Holy Spirit and liberation not occur. Spiritual discernment and empowerment is needed in order to engage the demonic strongholds of institutional evil. Incarnational witness is needed as Jesus Christ is manifested in the "blood, guts, and tissues of society."

African-American Pentecostals view of God is dynamic. The Holy Spirit is welcomed, not as an alien invader infringing upon the human spirit but rather as one who "empowers" us for engaging in the task of liberation as "enablers." It is our hope that our love for Jesus who is the Christ will propel us beyond the boundaries of creeds, denominationalism, nationalism, race, and class to demonstrate that God can and often does choose the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, the weak things of the world to confound the mighty.

ground to which we have all returned. We are called to be faithful in the way we live and work.

So that through the church the wisdom of Christ might vary might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (Eph. 3:10). Wink contends that the church must position itself not above its being a fallen and idolatrous as any other institution in society. It is incumbent upon Black religious leadership to deal with our "ideals and dreams and recover our prophetic witness. Repentance and repositioning our agenda is mandatory."

3. Transcendence Social Witness. Any attempt to engage in social transformation should be grounded in authentic spirituality. Over three decades since Willie Littlefield's "authentic liberation" emerged along with our genuine encounter with the Holy Spirit, we cannot have a genuine encounter with the Holy Spirit and liberation nor social spiritual discernment and empowerment is needed in order to engage the demonic strongholds of institutionalized. In our social witness is needed of Jesus Christ, a manifestation of the "liberating, just, and transformative" power of God.

African-American Pentecostals view of God is dynamic. The Holy Spirit is welcomed, not as an alien presence, but as one upon the African spirit that together as one who "empowers" us for engaging in the task of liberation as "warriors." Let us hope that our love for Jesus who is the Christ will propel us beyond the boundaries of racial, denominational, national, ethnic, class, and class to demonstrate that "God can and often does change the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, the weak things of the world to confound the mighty