

BY J. DEOTIS ROBERTS*

The Impact of the Black Church: Sole Surviving Black Institution

You are correct in including a discussion on the Black Church in any conference dealing with black culture, past, present or future. Indeed, as a minister and theologian, I am overjoyed to be a part of this significant conference. The Black Church was born in the African forests and has been our extended family during our experience of our sojourn in the New World. The black religious experience is the essence of our heritage, both oral and written. In a recent conversation with one of our greatest black churchmen, Rev. Dr. Thomas Kilgore of the Second Baptist Church of L.A. and president of the Progressive Baptist Convention, the observation was made that "our black religious heritage is too rich to be consigned to history. It must be preserved "for our posterity." He, therefore, pledged his moral support for those who are busy recording our religious heritage. I was greatly encouraged by these remarks, as I am by my invitation to share this conference experience with you.

We, as black theologians, have too often talked of our blackness, but have been writing mainly for a white readership. We must consciously change our style, and we must seek now to reach our non-theologically trained constituency, reaching beyond the Halls of Ivy. All blacks share a common black religious heritage. It is this common experience that we are called to make plain. We turn now to the assigned subject. I have elected to divide my subject-matter into three parts: (1) The history of the black church experience, (2) The theological understanding of the church in the Black experience, and (3) The mission of the black church.

I. THE HISTORY OF THE BLACK CHURCH EXPERIENCE

Africans always have been a deeply religious people. Religion as religion is a social force for cohesion. It provides an interpretation of ultimate reality, and it supplies meaning for every phase of the life cycle. African religions formed a complete belief-system with its own theology, ritual, faith and life style.

Osadolor Imasogie, a Nigerian religious scholar, provides us with a brief but helpful discussion on African Traditional Religion. He also indicates how this contextual religious experience is transformed by the

*An address presented to the Oklahoma Association of Black Personnel in Higher Education at its second bi-annual conference, April 28, 1978 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The Editors wish to thank Dr. Mary Williams, who was instrumental in obtaining this paper for publication. Dr. Roberts is Professor of Systematic Theology, Howard University School of Religion, Washington, D.C., and editor of *The Journal of Religious Thought*, a publication of the School of Religion at Howard.

encounter with the Christian Faith. Against the protest of many Western writers, Imasogie argues for a common African religious experience. He takes the position that there are differences, but that these divergences are overshadowed by beliefs held in common, e. g., The Eternal Supreme Creator. The differences, he suggests, are determined by socio-political and geographical situations.¹

He rejects the polytheism of Geoffrey Parrinder. That is the belief that the traditional African belief was in many gods. Imasogie also rejects the conclusions of Father Schmidt. Schmidt's contribution was that he discovered a Supreme Being among the Pigmy people of Central Africa. This was a gain over Emil Ludwig's view that since deity is a philosophical concept, Africans were incapable of such a profound idea. While Schmidt argued for the presence of this belief, he misread the content of the belief. Indeed, it seems that all Western scholars fall short at this point. The Supreme Being was understood to be a deistic god—a god who was a creator but not a provider. God was believed to be one who created the world and removed his presence and power from this world. It was, therefore, left to the lesser spirits to control affairs among humans in this world.²

It has been left to African scholars to clear up this confusion. Indeed, there seems to be almost universal agreement among African theologians that European scholars misread the African understanding of God. Our writer quotes from John Mbiti as well as from Idowu of his own country in asserting both that God is one and that the lesser spirits and the ancestors are understood as messengers and instruments of this one God. Furthermore, this God is not only the creator, but the one near at hand as provider. This God is also in some sense the redeemer in the African religious consciousness.³

We now quote from the black sociologist of religion, C. Eric Lincoln who renounces the white man's racial and cultural arrogance as he dismissed the black man's religion during slavery. Lincoln says:

The African he dismissed arbitrarily as heathen did . . . believe in a supreme God What the white man dismissed as African ancestor worship was a highly sophisticated expression of love and respect for the family, and a recognition of the continuity of its relationships What is more, the African moral codes were consistent with the notion of One God of all people.⁴

James H. Cone is correct in saying that the black church was born in slavery. His focus is on the pre-Civil War black church. This church, according to Cone, was related to a quest for social justice in this world. The slave preachers saw that slavery was inconsistent with Christianity. This recognition made early black churches the center of protest against the slave system. Cone dares to say:

¹ Osadolor Imasogie, "African Traditional Religion and Christian Faith," *Review and Expositor*, LXX/3 (Summer 1973) 284.

² *Ibid.*, p. 228.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 289-90.

⁴ C. Eric Lincoln, "The Development of Black Religion in America," *Review and Expositor*, LXX/3 (Summer 1973) 300.

. . . white Christianity in America was born in heresy. Its very coming to be was an attempt to reconcile the impossible—slavery and Christianity. And the existence of the black churches is a visible reminder of its apostasy. The black church is the only church in America which remained recognizably Christian during pre-Civil-War days. Its stand on freedom and equality through word and action is true to the spirit of Christ.⁵

The post-Civil War black church, according to Cone, soon became “a place of retreat from the dehumanizing forces of white power.” It was a place where blacks were safe from the racist structures that replaced slavery. The black church gradually became an instrument of escape instead of, as formerly, an instrument of protests. Black ministers perpetuated the white system of black dehumanization. The white society recruited black leaders from the black churches, who had bought into white theology and ethics. Blacks were told that they should live an upright life in preparation for heaven. But, on the other hand, they should not be concerned about white injustice—this was a sign of a loss of faith. They were to be prepared for patience and long-suffering in preparation for the final judgment. It was thus that black ministers were duped by the reign of Jim Crow in the churches as well as the society, and as Uncle Toms, they led black churches into a state of apostasy. Cone says: “The black church identified white words with God’s Word and convinced its people that by listening in faithful obedience to the ‘great white father’ they would surely enter the ‘pearly gates.’”⁶

Cone leaps historically from the pre-Civil War black church to Dr. King’s ministry. King, according to Cone, saw clearly the meaning of the gospel with its social implications and sought to instill its true spirit in the hearts and minds of black and white in this land. He was a prophet with a dream grounded not in the hopes of white America but in God. His dream led him to responsibilities in the present. Cone sees black power as the only hope for the black church. He goes so far as to say that even though King did not endorse black power, he prepared the way for its coming.⁷

Major Jones, covering the same period, the post-Civil War church, argues that the black church “guided a people through a time of great danger.” To preach the Gospel with its fullness, might well have invited genocide, Jones argues. I quote:

Whether one is critical of the black church for its lack of aggressive protest, or rather praises it for its strategy of deception, which surely saved a people, may be determined by how one reads post-Civil War history.⁸

The years immediately following the Civil War, roughly 1867-1877, were troubled times. DuBois called these “mystic years.” The North decided to try democracy. Many ministers turned to politics. Churches were meeting places. Ministers were often the only persons in a

⁵ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, New York: Seabury Press, 1969, p. 103.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 108-09.

⁸ Major J. Jones, *Black Awareness: A Theology of Hope*. New York: Abingdon Press, 1971, p. 54.

community sufficiently well developed to lead the people. They, therefore, had to devote themselves not just to church work, but to every matter of concern to the race. Whites had loosened black chains and were busy congratulating themselves for their selflessness and benevolence. Their sense of responsibility was at an end. Blacks who were landless, ignorant and penniless were left free to deal with starvation, poverty and want. Blacks were free for a few years. They were the political tools of the Republican party. But, when the Southern whites decided to take matters into their hands again, the government merely turned its head and allowed blacks to endure a new type of enslavement. The white man was free to take the lives of blacks with impunity, and sharecropping provided another form of enslavement.

We cannot gainsay the role which black ministers and churches played during these troubled times. And, then, due to the oppression blacks experienced in the South, they fled North and West into major urban centers. They were soon to discover in the cities that they could not compete with the opportunities offered to white ethnic emigrants from Europe who were racial cousins to those in power. It was then that the dark ghetto was born with its heinous crime and poverty, and the black man's heaven turned into hell.

The black religion nurtured us through all of these tragic experiences. It has African roots, but it has been transformed by the tragic soul-life of both slaves and so-called freed men. The churches under the leadership of black ministers, laymen and women have weathered this storm and guided us through this long night of suffering. The black church has been not merely an ark of salvation, but a hospital for the sick, a haven for the lonely, an agent of social action and change. It has been a center of protest, but it has also been a place where we have found meaning and healing for our bodies, minds and spirits. In sum, this is the role of the church in the history of black people.

II. THE CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHURCH

The church is a fellowship or a community of believers. In the Christian tradition, the church is a group of people who have accepted the discipleship of Jesus Christ. The fact that we are discussing the church rather than a mosque or a synagogue implies that we are addressing the Christian congregation.

This does not mean, however, that we are unaware that some blacks are Moslem, Jewish and secular. Indeed, some blacks are religious without belonging to any religious community. We are concerned, furthermore, that we partake of an ecumenical spirit which will enable us to work for our liberation across denominational and inter-religious lines. In fact, our churches must consider an operational unity which will enable us to support even secular organizations like the NAACP and the Urban League, which have a good track record in the cause of racial justice.

Our task here is to seek a deeper understanding of the nature of the black church. It is both an organism of the Spirit and a historic organization or institution. It is invisible as well as visible. Here we do not

refer to "invisible" in a sociological sense as E. Franklin Frazier does in his valuable study on the black church.⁹ Frazier had in mind the unofficial and often secret religious gatherings of slaves unknown to their masters. Our reference is rather to the theological distinction the Protestant Reformers made between the earthly fellowship of believers in Christ and the communion of saints in heavenly places. It is the distinction the adherents of the social gospel made between the church militant and the church triumphant.

After the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, some of his devotees waited in Jerusalem for the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. On the Day of Pentecost the Spirit descended upon the faithful. Those disciples who had been downcast with doubt and despair were transfigured into forceful proclaimers of the Good News that Jesus is both Lord and Christ. Many lives were changed to new moral and spiritual directions. A fellowship was born in which there were great sharing and caring. It was a community of love. It was a spirit-filled assembly. The Apostle Paul was later to refer to it as the Household of Faith or the Family of God. We will return to this image of the church as family. It is my impression that this image of the church taken out of the New Testament is essential to the self-understanding of the black church.

In I Cor. 12:14 the Apostle Paul asserts that we are many members in one body. Here we may draw upon the meaning of an East African term *harambee* (unity). Africans tell us that all traditional cultures on that vast continent have a strong sense of unity within community. The statement "because I am we are" is often repeated to express this type of kinship.

The religious experience of our forebears contained this type of unity within community. Again, this is why, I believe, the black slaves understood the Bible and its message almost by instinct. Both the synagogue of the Old Testament and the church of the New Testament contextually belong to a non-western social milieu. The relation of God to old Israel, the Hebrews, and to New Israel, the Church, could be readily understood by people aware of the presence and power of God in their midst. Africans understand religion as permeating the life of the entire life cycle and community. And this is at the heart of the biblical message.

Now, Paul discusses the church as the body of Christ. In essence he is saying that a body has many parts. Each organ or limb has a special function. But, on the other hand, the body is a unity.

It follows that the parts are inter-dependent. The health and wholeness of the one body depends upon how well each part functions and its harmonious working in concert with other parts. We now know, even better than Paul, the profundity of his insight. We can now go even further and point to the delicate relationship between mind and body. A good neuro-surgeon will check out all the physical and nerve connections to the brain, and if all is in order and the patient is still complaining, he will perhaps inquire concerning the patients' personal relations. Are you

⁹ Frazier's *The Negro Church in America* is reprinted in C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church Since Frazier*. New York: Schocken Books, 1976.

facing pressures on your job? Are you and your spouse having marital problems?

Paul, then, was insightful of something when he described the church as a body. A body is a unity-in-diversity. It allows for persons to fulfill themselves morally and spiritually, but it provides this self-fulfillment in the context of community. It is unity without conformity. There is room for self-expression, but this too is related to the well-being of others. We are a people needing to find a unity-in-diversity, but a unity-without-conformity. We need to know who we are as a people and forge our way to an operational unity if we would be free. But there must be an opportunity for each person to work through the identity-crisis which racism has foisted upon us and realize our potential. We must have healthy individuals if our group life is to be healthy and whole.

This church, however, is first and foremost a spiritual organism, a living body. Christ is the head of the church. The church exists under his lordship. It is anchored in faith. It is sustained by the Spirit's presence and power.

All the affirmations of the Christian belief-system converge in our understanding of the church. What we understand about God, sin, salvation, the redemption through Christ, the work of the Spirit, preaching, sacraments and the life after death—all these are aspects of the faith of the church. It is through the life of its members committed to this faith, bound in a covenant with each other under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and through the guidance and power of the Spirit, that the Christian mission is carried forth in the world.

In Ephesians 3:15 the Apostle Paul refers to the "whole family in heaven and earth." African theologians are now concerned about the "communion of the saints" against the background of an extended family which has a built-in reverence for ancestors. This religious tradition holds a belief in kinship that connects the living with the so-called living dead. This has real implications concerning respect for the elderly as well as for those ancestors who have departed this life. All of these concerns must be dealt with by African Christian theologians when they speak of the "communion of the saints."

While we can learn much from this discussion that will help us to overcome the tension between the haves and have-nots in our pews and the relation between the young and the old, our focus will be limited to the family image in the African religious community, in the black church and, of course, with the New Testament.

The word *Ujamma* (familyhood) is considered by Julius Nyerere, President of Tanzania, as the African way to socialism. As a socio-eco-political program in that country, it is developed out of African and Christian components. But *ujamma* is African in a traditional sense. It refers primarily to the kinship ties within the extended family. This concept of family is at the heart of social organization and it is permeated with religious beliefs and rituals. The life cycle of the individual as well as the destiny of the community is understood in the context of *ujamma*.

The black family and church have always been closely related in this

country. In a real sense the church is a family when it is true to its purpose in the black community. W. E. B. DuBois said some place that the church was a family for blacks when they had no family life.

Black families were divided on the auction block. Slavery dealt a terrible blow to black family life, notwithstanding Gutmann's study. Those who were able to keep the family afloat did so through an almost invincible love and determination. After emancipation, economic necessity again separated the family. The flight to the urban North either divided the family or consigned it to the woes of the dark ghettos of the North. Unemployment and the welfare system almost finished the black family off. These are socio-historic realities. The black church, South and North, was the place where blacks came together in a fellowship of sharing and caring. The black church has been the place where the lonely could find friendship, where haves and have-nots could rejoice together and affirm faith in a common Lord. Let us not forget the healing ministry of the black church. Even when the black church has been other-worldly in its message, it has enabled black people to assume dignity and maintain their sanity in an otherwise insane society.

But, I am proud to report that historically and at this moment the black church has been more than a haven for the lonely; it is a militant church—a prophetic church. Our understanding of religion has always been holistic. Even the spirituals which capture the tragic soul life of the slaves address themselves to freedom here as well as hereafter. Dr. Miles Mark Fisher, an authority on the black spiritual and the history of the black church, writes in *Slaves Songs in the United States* concerning the double meaning of the spirituals.

While white Christians divide up between those concerned about heaven and those concerned about life here and now, black Christians under the leadership of ministers and laypersons have always used their faith as a protest against injustices. Thus we as the family of God may now use our togetherness as a means for our deliverance. This is a tradition out of our historic black churches we need now both to celebrate and program.

We need to cultivate the presence of God as we come together for worship and service. Only thus will the worship and life of the black churches be prepared to fulfill their mission. The black church will not be able to function as an institutional agent of social change unless it brings the power and perspectives of its worship and life to bear upon its mission of liberation.

A colleague, Major Jones, has written a passage which I find helpful in making this point. He distinguishes between a static and dynamic concept of the church. The church, Jones argues, is not an *ecclesia* or community formed and founded once and for all and remains constant and unchanged. He speaks rather of the true church as "a congregating church." The people of God become an *ecclesia* only by the fact of a repeated concrete event when God meets them. Jesus said when two or three assemble in my name, I will be in their midst. Thus Jones writes that the gathered church has the potential of becoming the "event church." If

the people gathered lay hold of the entire promise of the gospel, become aware of the grace of the Father and are conscious of the abiding presence of Christ. The true church, then, is a group of people called of God to be the church of God in the world, accepting such a calling, and gathered as a people of God in his name. It is only then that the "event status" is conferred upon those gathered.¹⁰

If the impact of the black church is to continue, we must take seriously the tradition to which we belong. It is a heritage with a deep spirituality which has brought healing to a long-suffering people. Its songs, sermons and ceremonies have bound up the wound inflicted upon us by an inhumane social order. Its priestly tradition has brought meaning and healing to us as persons. But the black church has produced prophets as well as priests. Therefore, black churches as institutions have been agents of social change for the liberation of black people.

III. THE WITNESS OF THE BLACK CHURCH

The black church remains as the strongest historic and nation-wide institution we control as a people. In some sense the black church is an "ethnic" church which is capable of rallying issues which relate to black survival.

As we have said before, white churches are mainly spiritual comfort stations. This is the reason why conservative evangelical churches are growing. A white church concerned about social change and ethical issues is usually small and ineffective. It sits, as it were, on the fringe of church life. Many ethically concerned whites have had to leave their churches and form small cell groups to deal with what seems vital for them.

Because black churches are spiritually alive and socially concerned at the same time, there is a lot of promise for black churches to witness with great force in society. White preachers dare not preach on social evils from their pulpits lest they face a dwindling membership and a shrinking budget. In some cases they are disciplined by district superintendents and bishops. But, in many instances, black ministers must run to catch up with their people in social concern. We as a people need to hear a word of deliverance from our pulpits, and we expect those who utter these words to be ahead of us in social involvements. The oppressed need and appreciate a word of deliverance. Only in this form is the Gospel Good News.

Before discussing further the witness of the black churches, let us look at a new form of racism. Nathan Glazer has written a book which sums up the new form of racism. The book is entitled: *Ethnic Inequality and Public Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1976). He refers to "affirmative action" as "affirmative discrimination."

William V. Shannon sums up the situation well:

After two centuries of slavery and another century of Jim Crow second-class citizenship, the court decisions and civil rights legislation of the 1950's and 60's finally destroyed segregation and overt racial discrimination¹¹

¹⁰ Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-58.

¹¹ *The New York Times* Book Review, February 8, 1976.

Shanon rightly conceives of these gains of the 50's and 60's as merely laying the foundation for further progress. He agrees with remarks made by President Lyndon Johnson in a commencement address at Howard University in June, 1965. Johnson referred to the long period of deprivation of human rights blacks had endured and suggested that much needed to be done to upgrade these disabilities before all blacks would be able to compete. Johnson said: "It is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates." He further states:

This is the next and the more profound stage of the battle for civil rights. We seek not just freedom but opportunity. We seek not just legal equality as a right and a theory *but equality as a fact and equality as a result.*¹²

Harvard sociologist Glazer is saying "no" to Johnson. Glazer asserts that affirmative action has failed the black masses. It has helped those blacks who could have made it on their own—the black middle class. His argument is an example of the new form of racism which exalts "merit" as the standard for progress.¹³ Glazer does not understand what it means to be black in a society saturated with racism. There are scores of jobs which would be crowded out by white applicants if the Federal Government did not intervene to make sure that blacks obtained their share of such jobs. We need to remind those blacks who are doing well of their responsibility of reaching back, aiding those who are still struggling to survive.

While continuing to be a soul-winning church, the black church must realize its awesome responsibility in dealing with collective evils. Many people are not even aware of their participation in a system that destroys black people. Joseph R. Washington, Jr., writes about racism as a pre-conscious and irrational fact in white America.¹⁴ To be born white provides a white male with a ten-fold advantage and a white-female with at least a five-fold advantage over either a black male or female. Most black middle class people of my generation, with few exceptions, are the first affluent generation. Compare this with two hundred or more years of affluence in some white families. We are a people struggling to survive.

Personal friendships with whites and even inter-racial marriages will not overcome this cleavage between the races. There is a systemic, cultural and institutional problem to be tackled. Whatever our personal preferences may be, we have a responsibility to free a whole people and our personal freedom is tied to their liberation. There is no place in this society where we can escape racism. There is no status we can achieve where racism does not haunt us or someone we love.

The black church as a powerful institution, made up of gifted and influential people from our race, has great potential as an agent of liberation for black people. But it is only partially mobilized. It needs to become conscious of its opportunity and its resources in this freedom struggle.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *The Politics of God*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1966, Chap. 2.

We need a socially-conscious and well-trained multiple-staff in our large congregations. A single person at the helm of a 3,000-4,000 membership congregation is drained of all of his/her energy and is dealing with emergency basket cases. We need to arouse, organize and activate the considerable lay leadership in our midst, including our youth. To this end, we may no longer rely on the annual revival, as important as this is, to renew the faith of members as well as call to repentance the unsaved.

There must be persistent Christian nurture through teaching and counseling as well as preaching and worship. Our people must be educated in their new consciousness and responsibilities. They must understand the form and dimensions of the problems we face. They must understand the *this-worldly* message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who is Lord of the Church. The black church must be concerned with personal crises and do a good job in pastoral care. It must minister to the sick, the helpless, the dying and the bereaved. It must be engaged in social welfare. It must meet personal, family and community emergencies. But as an institution it must confront the unjust organizations and systems of power for the end of social transformation. The black church, following the example of Dr. King, must deal with political, social and economic causes which make life more human.

But the black church must be wise in its efforts. The church must always be true to its nature and mission in the world. It must bring to bear its understanding of the Gospel upon all causes and movements. Its critical and objective frame of judgment must be anchored in the Bible and the confession of the Christian Creed. Therefore, the black church is not just another agency—it is not just another organization. The power of the black church is not merely a material power. It is spiritual. It is anchored in a community of believers who serve and work under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

The church may cooperate with secular institutions for humanizing the social order. It may give its support on issues which it endorses out of its commitment to the worth of each person under God. But the role of the church is not merely *functional*. Its task is to bring to its material resources a transcendent, spiritual perspective and moral insights which enrich and empower any effort for human fulfillment and social justice. Should our black churches deny their Lord and uproot themselves from a rich spiritual heritage, like Samson of old they would lose their spiritual power and hence their physical strength, and would be readily defeated by the evils we face. As a secular institution the black church, with its meager personnel and financial resources, would be easily defeated. The strength of the black church is first of all in its power to motivate, organize and empower black people to face great odds in the moral struggle for human dignity. The black church is and will continue to be an awesome force for the liberation of black people, if it remains true to its faith and its Lord, maintains its integrity and spirituality and is *unbossed* and *unbought* by the forces of injustice in our society:

“Never send to know for whom the bell tolls,
it tolls for thee.”