

Recent Directions In Black Theological Education

*Introduction of Speaker:
Major J. Jones*

When the committee charged with the responsibility of selecting a speaker for this occasion of the inauguration of Dr. James Deotis Roberts as the fourth president of The Interdenominational Theological Center, we were highly conscious of the seriousness of our task. We feel that in the selection of Andrew Young as the man for this occasion we have fulfilled in a highly laudable manner our task. For, first of all, he is a product of the ethos of the black community. Secondly, he so adequately symbolizes our ideal of a Christian minister. He is as is well known eminently qualified educationally, with honors too many to enumerate. Personally I am honored because Andrew Young has for a long time been a contemporary in the civil rights struggle for freedom and human dignity. I recall, as a member of the Board of Directors of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, when he was employed, first, as a staff member, and, subsequently, elected Executive Director of that organization. When he was elected a United States Congressman from the 5th District of the State of Georgia, the Reverend Dr. Young did not relinquish his interest in the civil rights movement, nor did he hold his peace when he was appointed Ambassador to The United Nations. Indeed, his commitment to justice have overflowed into every responsibility that he has assumed. Many persons in our nation, in other nations, indeed, in the world, have not always agreed with Ambassador Young, but without exception, no one has had an occasion to question his ethical commitment or moral integrity. For he has accepted every responsibility knowing full well that there could well come that time when resignation was more desirable than the compromise of personal integrity. It is for this standard that he has earned our respect and acclaim. As scholar, politician, as Christian gentleman, a world reknown and recognized statesman, as spokesman for justice and human dignity, he is my ambassador still. I have the greatest happiness in presenting to you Ambassador Andrew Young.

This is an occasion beyond any of our expectations, and I am happy to have been invited to participate with you in this event. James Deotis Roberts and I were students together in seminary—at least, he was a student. In fact, he was a student and I was a floundering young person who had been sent on the quest for a theological education by none other

than Jim Waits, presently Dean at Emory University, Atlanta, who was then presiding over a youth project of The National Council of Churches. At that time, Al Moving was the Executive Director of the Department of Youth of the National Council; he is now a moving force within the Christian Council of Metropolitan Atlanta. I could call the names of many others, but the important point is that many of us were young together in Christ Jesus, and still find ourselves following very much in the way that had earlier been opened to us by our Lord.

As Dr. Roberts accepts his great challenge, the challenge of leading this precious institution into the 1980s, he follows a wonderful tradition among black persons, a tradition that history has yet to record, but a tradition that made it possible for the church among Americans to be far more relevant and powerful than anyone deemed possible. Jim Roberts, as we called him at Hartford Seminary, was early-on looking to the sound scholarly undergirding of the Christian faith. He was a man of power, a man of inspiration, of dedication, but also a man who knew the dangers of inspiration and dedication when they are not disciplined by a solid understanding of the historic revelation of God through Jesus Christ and His Church, a man who was very much aware of the dangers of the Holy Spirit when That Spirit is not grounded in the understanding of the two thousand year history of men and their relationship to the living Spirit of our Lord. And so it was a challenge to him to think along theological and ethical lines in relationship to black people, especially the black family, and to pursue the question of the manner by which they could provide relevant leadership and witness in the world in which we called to live. Thus, from his earliest days at Hartford Seminary he was a scholar, a scholar of the faith. As we face the period of confusion which engulfs our planet, nothing is more necessary than scholars of the Christian faith, men who know what God is doing in our world.

We look to theological-educational leadership. For we are in danger of floundering now. Often our foundations literally shake as we seek to determine the new direction that God's-history takes us at the present moment. We don't read clearly the handwriting on the wall, and if we read only the newspapers we get more and more confused and possibly sink deeper and deeper into despair. We affirm in our theological understanding a God who rules and who transforms and redeems mankind by His own suffering and the suffering of His children, yet we want with fervor to understand the full meaning of the suffering and death of the many black Atlanta children in our present experience. We want to know what God is saying to us in Atlanta, what is this suffering, what cross is that that we are being made to bear, and how God can raise us up and raise up this city, and raise up these churches to newer levels of faith and commitment. Perhaps we are learning anew that there can be no resurrections without crucifixions, that suffering is redemptive, and that the Church has flowered by the shedding of blood and that the blood of the martyrs is indeed the seed of faith in the church. And so we look to theological education and leadership; we look for a solid ethical understanding of the human dilemma of this time and the ethical path that we

now must trod.

This interdenominational theological institution has provided a vital sense of direction. I remember going to Birmingham with Martin Luther King, Jr. along with some four hundred clergy-men and -women, many of whom were products of this seminary, having been students here. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s was much richer and more powerful because of the theological dimension that was put into it by this school. There in Birmingham we saw coming together perhaps the most powerful articulation of a relevant faith and ministry that recent history has known. For Martin Luther King, Jr., who stands in the same tradition as you now stand, brought together the power of the black church, the suffering of a black people, and the disciplined theological, philosophical and ethical understanding of the history of the church down through the ages, and we witnessed all of this converging in a document written in jail, very much as were the letters of Paul the Apostle. For, as this letter from a Birmingham jail defined in a theological, ethical and political context, the sense of direction for a nation, we saw the breaking down of the dividing line of racial hostility and the desegregation of this southland by the action of God's people, not because they were better, not because they were wiser, not because they in any sense were better Christians than anybody else, but because they were in fact the "suffering servants of this nation, and because of their suffering they were more in tune to the movement of the Spirit than most and more responsive to the continual call of Christ. The road to Birmingham also led to Selma and Montgomery, but also to Memphis. And so we can never forget that our theology is a theology of the Cross.

And so we must learn that a theology of the cross teaches us that there can be no Christian faith that is not in some way incarnate in the political, moral and family institutions of our time. Indeed, the very divisions which cause much of the suffering in today's world bear's a strangely denominational character. It always bothered me that Joshua Nkomo was a Presbyterian and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabe was a Roman Catholic, and that Abel Muzorewe was a Methodist, and that Ndabanigi Sithole was a member of the United Church of Christ, and the battle lines of a civil war amazingly followed those demoninational lines established by Christian missionaries, and the factions that still tend to divide Angola are Augustino Neto, the child of a Methodist minister, Jonas Savimbi, a Congregationalist minister who somehow got led astray by South Africa—we Congregationlists are terribly dumb—and Holden Roberto, a child of a Baptist minister living in Zaire, and so the divisions in Angola still follow the religious divisions which were inherited from historic Protestantism. In these our own American states, much of the divided politics of New Orleans, Louisiana—my home originally—go back to the Protestant-Catholic, Creole-Black confusion which has been part of our history. Thus, indeed, our unity in modern times depends on a ministry of reconciliation which somehow breaks down all of these divisions which deny us our permanent sonship with Christ under one Father. And, I haven't yet said anything about the fact that

eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour in these United States of America, and that, while black and white may work together, while we may play football together, it is still something of a tragedy that Atlanta Stadium at one o'clock on Sunday at a Falcon's game is far more integrated than any of our churches in this city of Atlanta, and somehow that division, that division which makes it impossible for us to really and truly fully relate as brothers and sisters is part of the politics which still allows us to be fragmented and which denies the political governance and the reconciliation which could mean salvation for us as a nation as well as a people. We still have the division of East and West, the division of Protestant and Catholic and Orthodox, the divisions of rich and poor, and thus our ministry somehow cannot just include the political dimension of the nation and the political-industrial complex, but somehow the system of economic justice must roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

In all of this, a particularly heavy responsibility falls upon us as black Christians. For we, as black Christians, are among the affluent of the world, we are richer than anybody else on the face of this earth other than white Christians, and when you talk about the collective gross national product of a black America, you are talking about a gross national product of 147 billion dollars, annually, which is greater than the GPN of Canada, and greater than the GPN of all five Scandinavian nations combined. We are not poor, we who are black Christians. Thus, when we talk about the "least of our brothers" we ain't talking about us! We are, in fact, talking about somebody else. We are talking about our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world, and in other cultures, and we are talking about a need to somehow find a new international economic order that allows all of God's children anywhere to experience the blessings and opportunities of God's children everywhere.

We as black Christians have an advantage, the advantage of a revolutionary spirit moving across this planet of ours, a revolutionary spirit that clearly points out to us that we too are becoming at ease in Zion. The ministry to the churches of black Christians has somehow to challenge a fat, black, comfortable religion to get out of our Cadillacs and air-conditioned churches, to forego investment in fur coats and Mercedes, to challenge the materialism to which we, too, have succumbed in this society, so that we no longer operate as agents of economic justice in the interest of really and truly feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. This is not talk about charity or socialism but talk about a movement of blacks within the context of this present society, a movement which generates new jobs and economic opportunities, putting people to work.

Of course, it is very dangerous when we as black preachers start trying to collect and organize other folks' money—Martin Luther King, Jr. would never touch anybody's money—for every movement that black-americans have had somehow has been burdened down and the seeds of discord sown through the arguments about what happened to the money. The black preacher has to be very careful about this as we begin to urge

our parishioners to pool their resources and to invest, and there must be a clearly defined demarcation between giving to the church and the organization by the church of certain parachurchly, parareligious economic corporations which, while under the judgment and scrutiny of secular law, nevertheless give us the opportunity through building credit unions, through business councils, to invest collectively in things that will produce jobs and opportunities for our people.

There is a challenge for us in the 1980's, a challenge to do what the black church did in the 60's when preachers produced a massive people-on-fire and brought about social change without violence. We saw that same spiritual fire go through our preachers in the 1970's, creating a generation of political leadership like Maynard Jackson, a fourth generation son of a preacher, and Dick Hatcher and Gibson, both of whom were involved in the church through childhood and adult life and naturally giving a new kind of black Christian leadership. Black politicians will probably be the first generation of politicians in American history to come out of office poorer than when they entered office. And that is to their credit. For they went into politics, not to make themselves rich, but they went in with a Christian commitment to serve. Having done that, and needing to continue that form of leadership, the black church now faces the challenge to create opportunities for a new business leadership, a leadership that must take on the task in the 80's of helping to maximize the industrial and productive potential of that 147 billion dollar gross national product generated by blacks, so that we no longer get lost in unemployment but "found" in enough economic expansion so that every black American citizen might have a job. For if there is to be full employment in this society, a new generation of small business is going to have to grow up around the collective commitment of the black church to spend our money and generate new economic growth in our own neighborhoods. This kind of new challenge for the 80's will require a careful definition of training for ministerial leadership and a careful definition of the place of the minister in business development in our time. This is perhaps the more powerful revolution of our day, that which offers us the most fruitful ground upon which to stand.

As the black minister faces the 80's, a vital aspect of the challenge of his education revolves around the black woman in the church. I don't know, brothers and sisters, but especially brothers, whether you know what it means when *several* times in the recent past, a woman has been elected President of the Student Christian League, the student government association at the ITC. What we are seeing in our community is the phenomenon of the black insecure male preacher confronted by black women who refuse any longer to be pushed into the background of our church life, and indeed, of our life in general. If it has not already happened in your household and church, it will, sooner or later. It is only a matter of time. James Deotis Roberts cannot have three beautiful and intelligent daughters without them helping him to understand that they are as powerfully intelligent as any son he might have had. And when I, myself, slip into sexist language and actions it does not take long for my

own girlchild to remind me of my errors. The problem of the 21st century, the problem of the definition of roles between male and female, already looms before us, and the biblical word concerning neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female, takes on an urgent necessity as we seek to be one in Christ Jesus. Thus, when our women start preaching with power, when we elect women bishops, and when we start having universally what we now have in Atlanta, powerful female preachers stealing other folks' members and their churches growing faster than anybody else's because such women preachers are burning with sensitivity and a theological understanding that is a threat to males in the black ministry, then, Dr. Roberts, the theological definition of the role of women in the black church is going to become more a part of the agenda of ITC.

In view of all of this, this seminary in the 80's can become part of the general theological challenge to this nation. And we could not have found a person better prepared to lead during this coming decade and many decades to come than has been found in President Roberts. In him we have found one endowed with sensitivity, grounded in theological understanding, founded in the ethical application of the Christian faith, steeped in the political and economic ramifications of the Gospel, one who builds upon the foundations of the necessity for strong family life. Thus, this time for ITC is a wonderful time to be alive.