

Black Ecumenism and Theological Educator

I

Dr. C. Eric Lincoln in writing about the vision of The Congress of National Black Churches, an Institutional-Denominational coming together of the Seven Historic Black Churches of over 100,000 membership entitles the vision "The Search for Community in an On-going Tradition," and writes:

"One of the peculiar legacies of the Black experience in religion in America has been the distinctive cultural patterning of the Black Christian churches. While Africa was one of the earliest and most fertile seedbeds of Christianity, the West African diaspora who came eventually to embrace the faith in America did so largely on the basis of their contact with the prevailing Anglo-Saxon culture here in the New World. In consequence, bath and baby came in the same catchment, and the African expatriates who had already been forced into a common secular mode by virtue of being Black and African, now found themselves bequeathed a religious faith as variegated in style and conformation as the roots of European sectarianism could make it. Hence, 'conversion' for the African diaspora meant considerably more than the voluntary assumption of the Cross. It meant also the involuntary assumption of the peculiar budens of Anglicanism, Lutheranism, Congregationalism, or one of several varieties of Presbyterianism, Baptism or Methodism.

"In recognition of God's options to choose the instruments by means of which man's salvation is to be accomplished, few leaders in the Black Church would be prepared to say that denominationalism is inherently evil. However, the fact that the Black Church had no historic theological or creedal or political stake in the issues which made segmentation the normative mode for the mainline religion in America has troubled many, and has kept alive the question of whether in the life and ministry of the Black Church, God's final act was the act which brought these churches into being; or whether there may not be a more consummate utilization of their ministries through a more perfect celebration of their common gifts.

"It is the pursuit of this more perfect celebration which calls The Congress of National Black Churches (CNBC) into existence. For two centuries and more, we have walked in the shadow of the suspicion that our burden of sectarianism was unhistoric, unwarranted and unnatural. And while we have at times indulged the apparent logic of our labels, we have never been entirely free of the pervasive notion that our indulgence has been both hazardous and gratuitous, for the labels we bear were born of an experience which is not our own. On the other hand, it was our common Black experience that nurtured us in one faith, kept us in a common fold, and delivered us from a common destiny. Now it is the realization that if we are not diligent in the celebration of what is common to our past, we may compromise forever the power of unity which may be providential to our future."¹

* Bishop, African Methodist Episcopal Church

¹ Lincoln, *CNBC Program* (Indianapolis, Ind. The Congress Press, 1979).

II

This more perfect celebration of one faith, one fold, and one destiny, Black Ecumenism raises the ever persistent question of the Black experience in America. Can Black people get together to determine their destiny and fulfill their mission? There have been many productive approaches to Black Ecumenism Locally, Regionally, Nationally, Educationally and Theologically. These approaches include the following:

1. Local Clusters and Alliances in Mission and Ministry to Local Concerns: community issues, civil rights mobilization, sharing facilities, and cooperative programs and service.
2. Regional and Judicatory leaders and organizations getting together which would include Black Denominations and Black Caucases.
3. Sister Churches in their common sectarian heritage exploring cooperation, unity, and union.
4. Higher Education and Theological Education Consortia such as Atlanta University Center and the Interdenominational Theological Center.
5. Formal National Coalitions uniting around the Moral and Theological issue of Racism. Among these are S.C.L.C., N.C.B.C., O.I.C., Black Theology Project, and Black Pastors Conference which rightfully claim heroic contributions to the continuing struggle for justice and liberation in the name of the God of Justice.

It is important to identify the old Fraternal Council of Churches separately as an Ecclesiastically intentional thrust at Black Ecumenism in the life of the Black Church. Primarily the Black Baptist Conventions and the Black Methodist Churches were in conversation, cooperation, and witness holding the potential for Institutional Black Ecumenism. However, its dissolution following the creation of the National Council of Churches ended the last mechanism supported and sustained by the Black Churches whose first intention was Ecumenism.

III

None of these Coalitions, Centers, Consortia, Conferences or Councils reached the full Oneness, Wholeness, and Allness essential to Black Ecumenism. There are more than sufficient reasons for this shortfall. Most of these efforts were not born of primary religious intentionality to seek oneness, wholeness, and allness in Christ, but were valuable efforts to reorder power relations in Church and society.

Other reasons are well stated by Dr. James Forbes:

"Black people have been deliberately programmed for disunity; powerful forces have been used by our oppressors to rob us of self-respect and trust for our own brothers and sisters; some Blacks have been lured through special rewards to abandon the masses to enjoy preferred status not available to other people of color. Another explanation that has been offered is that Black institutions, including the churches, have had to struggle with the issue of balancing faithfulness to the mission with the necessity for developing self-survival mechanisms. The energy required for denominational survival seems to leave very little strength for collaborative efforts. Finally, there is thought that there may be a decreasing capacity to unite due to the many aborted attempts to achieve Black unity. Many endeavors towards unity are scarcely announced before they are quickly closed down by an inconceivable array of obstacles. There is only so much patience and power to keep reaching down to pick up dashed hopes. For these and similar reasons, some persons seriously doubt whether we can

expect substantial movement toward greater cooperation among Black denominations and Black Christians."²

IV

I raise now the question whether this great and unique Theological Education Consortium we call the I.T.C. is now achieving Black Ecumenism or whether, bluntly speaking, it is Ecclesiastical Pluralism in Theological Education. Ecumenism is a whole cloth, while Pluralism is a quilt of many pieces. My brief association and experience with the Inter-denominational Theological Center constrains me to paraphrase the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Church at Corinth:

"I am of Gammon, I am of Turner, I am of Morehouse,
I am of Phillips, I am of Mason, I am of Smith,
I am of The Center."

Denominational identify and self-interest as well as preserving the original terms, structure, and leaders appear equally important as the training of pastors and scholars. I say to the I.T.C. community and to the Black Christians who care that the time is at hand for authentic Black Ecumenism: Oneness, Wholeness, and Allness. The logic of all our labels has grown thin and counterproductive. It is urgent and proper that the leadership for and this new depth in Ecumenism come from our Center for Theological training and reflection, illustrating the enormous possibilities of the Black Church acting in oneness on the agenda of Liberation and Justice for the whole wide World. Dr. Jones sharpens this possibility:

"The church remains as the one institution in the Black community that has proven itself, historically, to be viable. It possesses an ideology which is rooted in the very nature of the creator of the universe and the guarantor of its justice. It has been a source of hope for individuals and a corporate base for shared concern. It is a sleeping giant anesthetized by the competition born of a need to survive—a battery waiting to be hooked up to an engine powerful enough to call all of its energy."³

If we do not seize the time at hand, the evil designs of those who divide and obstruct us will continue to define our future possibilities, and continue as the dominant reality determining when we can move towards the fulfillment of our dreams which have been deferred too long.

V

There are realities of Black life and faith which summon us to Oneness, Wholeness, and Allness. Again, Dr. Jones, Dean of Howard Divinity School speaks about these realities in the B. Moses James Lectures in 1980, and I quote him:

"But an equally fateful effect of oppression and racism in America was that it imposed a kind of arbitrary community upon Blacks which grew not from a sense of

² Forbes, *CNBC Brochure* (Parkville, NY, National Media Center, 1980).

³ Jones, *6th Annual B. Moses James Lectures* (Chicago, Ill. Reform Church, 1980).

peoplehood, but from the fact of being delimited by forces exterior to the group. This is to say that white oppression forced Blacks to come to an essential awareness of a communal givenness. They became aware that no matter what their economic, social, or political circumstances, the determinative fact in their lives was that they were Black."⁴

I add that denominational circumstance does not change the determinative fact of life for Blacks as being Black. Let me identify those realities of our life and faith which call us:

1. Our Common Creator: God
2. Our Common Root: Africa
3. Our Common Color: Black
4. Our Common Experience: Oppression
5. Our Common Commitment: Christ
6. Our Common Pain: Suffering
7. Our Common Hope: Liberation and Justice.

These commonalities of the Black Church and the Black community give me hope that authentic Black Ecumenism in Church life and in Theological Education are possible. Again I resort the insightful and clear thoughts and words of Dr. James Forbes:

"They remind us of the collective Black might by which an oppressed people were sustained in the abyss of demonic enslavement. They recall to our attention the post-emancipation sacrifices made by former slaves all over the nation—those who joined together to build schools, churches and employment opportunities, and to rebuild a spirit of hope in hearts damaged by burdens too heavy for human beings to bear. They urge us not to forget the remarkable coordinated network of churches, social agencies and professional organizations which together sparked the social transformation called the Black Power Revolution."⁵

VI

Black Ecumenism: Oneness, Wholeness, and Allness in the Black Christian community—is an idea whose time has come. And that idea, as it becomes reality, will require a more excellent Theological Center. That Theological Center is required to provide us with the categories, cosmologies, symbols, values, ideas, archives, research, literature, and strategies whereby we can fulfill our ministry and mission for the political, social, economic, cultural, and psychological liberation of poor and rich, oppressed and the oppressors.

Dr. John Satterwhite, one of the real Black Ecumeniacs, and I say that to compliment him, wrote me about this place and this statement as follows:

"As long as the I.T.C. represents our divisions on the basis of confessional expressions of faith that were not created out of our historical experience, Black people will continue to have difficulties relating the diverse confessions of faith and the struggle for freedom."⁶

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid-Forbes.

⁶ Satterwhite, *Memo on Black Ecumenism and Theological Education* (Washington,

VII

Black Ecumenism further demands Theological Education which equips ministers and scholars to deal with the felt needs of the constituencies to be served. The self-concept, the stated purposes, the administration, the faculty, the curriculum, and the operational style of the I.T.C. must be understood and constructed with this necessity in mind. In addition to the tradition components of Theological Education: Biblical, Theological, Historical, and Practical Studies, Black Ecumenism and Liberation demand Theological Education which prepares its recipients to deal with the problems of Black life they will face whether they look for them or not. This means the graduate of I.T.C. will have acquired competence in the traditional disciplines of Theological Education, and also be skilled, or at least have initial training in the following areas of Socio-Economic Studies:

1. Pathology and Possibilities of Ghetto Life and the process of Ghettoization.
2. Stewardship of the Biggest Black Asset—the Black Church. Economics, Management, Program, Building, and Leveraging of Resources.
3. The Survival, Coping, and Problem-solving Mechanism needed in the Black Community.
4. Community Organization and Advocacy.
5. The Judicial, Social Service, Health Care, and Welfare Systems.
6. Programs and Resources in Child Care, Gerontology, Housing, Consumerism, Cooperatives, Public Education, and Employment.
7. Developing associations and closing the separation between Blacks-who-have and Blacks-who-have-not.
8. The Uses of Media and other forms of communication in community.
9. The criminal justice system and the problems of Black Crime, and Black-on-Black Crime.

VIII

I believe the Interdenominational Theological Center has a special and unique opportunity to meet the needs of Black Ecumenism, Black Life, and Liberation in Theological Education. It alone, among Seminaries of my knowledge can enact and embody Oneness, Wholeness and Allness. It has a headstart in becoming a place where Black Christians work in unity, collaboration and full cooperation. It alone has the resources in and around it to be a Theological Lighthouse to the Black Church and the Black community. It has the discipline and imagination to be creative in response to the needs and aspirations of the oppressed for liberation, justice and Human Fulfillment. I.T.C. has the spectacular privilege to be the place where excellence in Theological Education and an Inclusive Black Christian Community can be one. Let I.T.C. become the Black Ecumenical Theological Center which is one, whole, and all, reaching beyond its name, the Interdenominational Theological Center which implies many and God will bless the new Oneness, Wholeness and Allness.

IX

I believe God has given the I.T.C. an opportunity to be a blessing not only to Black Christian Community but to the whole Christian Community. Let the eloquence of Reverdy Cassius Ransom state the opportunity and obligation which awaits you:

"To whom does the spiritual and social future of humanity belong? Certainly not to weapons of war, the power of wealth, the wisdom of statesmen, the inventions and discoveries of science, or the cold logic of systems of philosophy. The spiritual and social pathway of humanity is strewn with the debris of their inadequacy.

"The African and his descendants are the last spiritual reserves of humanity. It may be that the nations, now empty in midst of their wealth, weak through the strength of their armies, and now bewildered prey of the magnificence and wonders their genius has created, shall remain in their social, economic and spiritual valley of dry bones until, as of old, the question comes to some Black prophet. "Can these bones live?" Then out of the depths of his highly spiritual and emotional nature, he shall prophesy to the dry bones of our civilization until they are united, clothed with the warm blood of our common human brotherhood and be made alive by the spirit of God dwelling in their hearts. The visions of prophets, the dreams of poets, the hopes and longings of the poor and oppressed, shall find a fulfillment in the rebirth of a society in which the spirit of God inspires and hallows all forms of human intercourse among the races and nations of the earth."⁷

⁷ Ransom, *Papers, Sermons, Speeches* (Tawawa Chimney Corners, Ohio, 1955).