

THOMAS HOYT, JR.*

The African-American Worship Experience and The Bible

Worship

The word worship is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *weorthscipe* which evolved into worthship and finally into the present word. The study of worship has been formally listed as the science of liturgics, or a study of the development of form in worship. The Greek word in the Septuagint, *leitourgia*, which translates the Hebrew word *Aboda*, is the basis for the word liturgy. In the New Testament the word *leitourgia* indicates the general service which Christians give unto God. It is translated "ministration" and is applied to the work of Zachariah, the priest (Luke 1:23), to the public service of the disciples (Acts 13:2), to Paul's spiritual service of faith (Phil. 2:17), and to Christ's ministry (Heb. 8:6). Our intent in this presentation is to investigate the African-American's general service which Christians give unto God based on their formal worship experiences in light of historical and biblical bases.

Diversity and Sameness Among African-Americans

We should begin our discussion of worship and the African-American experience with the affirmation that there are diverse worship expressions within the African-American experience. Those who evaluate worship primarily on the basis of emotional expressions will consider worship to conform to the Black experience only if there is an abundance of "Amens," the shout, the pat of one's feet, the clap of one's hands, or swaying to the sound of gospel music. While one must contend that emotion is a part of religion and especially a part of the Black experience and expression, it is wrong to pinpoint what or how that emotion ought to be displayed. In his well known comments, Martin Luther King, Jr. rightly cautioned the classist Church against displaying "more religion in their hearts and minds than in their hands and feet." On the other hand, he cautioned the more emotional Churches against showing "more reli-

* Dr. Hoyt is Professor of Biblical Studies, Hartford Seminary.

gion in their hands and feet than in their hearts and minds." There is true celebration when head, heart, hands and feet work together. The total person must be involved in religion and in the worship experience.

Not every African American's expression will be the same within a formal worship experience. One of the reasons for this is the great diversity within the African-American experience. The Roman Catholic scholar, Edward Braxton, recognizing this diversity, appropriately said:

... I think it can be argued that it is an empirical fact that the Black experience in the United States is a complex, multi-faceted and multidimensional reality. It may be rural, urban, or suburban. It may be lower class, middle, or upper. It may be Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, or Catholic. It may be devout or irreligious. It may be politically conservative or activist. There are Black families who prefer to think of themselves as Negroes or people of color and not as Blacks.¹

Why there is diversity of thought and expression among African-Americans or whether this is good or bad is a further question. The point stressed is that one ought not force every African-American to express the exact replica of form in worship as test of a true African-American.

African-Americans and Western Expressions of Worship

While there are differences of expressions in worship between different groups of African-Americans, there are equally differences of expressions in worship among African-Americans and others in the American ethos. In fact, Black theology arose partly to protest the views of Joseph Washington, Jr. who gave a negative evaluation of the black Church and its worship practices as contrasted with white Churches. He claimed that the black Church's main concern was for freedom and equality and therefore it lacked an adequate theology; the black church after the 1920s became dysfunctional and was therefore a "center for the disengaged"; that its worship was insufficiently based and therefore obsolete; and that white Christians ought to absorb the black church unto itself in order to save black people.² So negatively was Washington's book received that others took seriously the need to engage in research and to publish, consequently diffusing his negative suggestions concerning the black Church and its worship. Washington's initial critique of Black worship was based on western ideas which are themselves based on Greek understandings.

Clarence Rivers, in a very insightful article entitled "The Oral African Tradition Versus the Ocular Western Tradition," argues that western

¹ Edward K. Braxton, "Reflections from a Theological Perspective," *This Far By Faith: American Black Worship and its African Roots* (Washington, D.C.: The National Office for Black Catholics, 1977), p. 64.

² Cf. Joseph Washington, Jr. *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

culture's tendency toward puritanism, discursiveness, and literal-mindedness, makes emotional, celebrative and poetic worship suspect in the minds of many in western culture.³ This discursive western culture is based upon a "sight biased cultural orientation" which probably derived from dependence on reading and writing as the chief vehicle of culture. The discursive understanding gains its philosophical bases from the Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, both of whom elevated sight as supreme among the senses. What we see and not what we feel is more important in a culture grounded upon such a basis. Those whose world view is through the eye have a tendency to deal with abstractions and detachments. Abstraction leads to the illusion that what one sees in such limited manner is the real. The detached observer takes pride in being uninvolved, thus abhorring emotional involvement.

Rivers contends that Western culture's emphasis on worship dominated by the eye "... will more readily communicate to 'enlighten the intellect' than to move the heart, and will therefore, in the context of liturgy, produce sermons, prayers and commentaries that are tediously prosaic, didactic and explanatory."⁴ This view is proven in history. From the fifth century until the Reformation, emphasis was placed upon buildings, acts designed to fit their set forms, performed at set times, with development of the Mass as a certain way of celebrating the Lord's Supper with elaborate artistic forms.⁵ The service included many scripture readings, numerous prayers with versicles and responses, a variety of hymns, and the commemoration of saints. A number of books were necessary in the conduct of the service: the psalter, the antiphonal, the hymnal, the Bible, the collect book, the processional; and for direction, the Consuetudinary, the Ordinal, and the Directorium. The so called liturgy was designed to serve an authoritarian church in its claim to bestow grace through a sacramental system.⁶ Emphasis on form and ritual was more attuned to the Jewish worship in the Temple than to the free expressions of worship among the early Christians.

Not only does western culture's concept of the senses undergird the world view which governs one's practice of worship; there is also the Greek understanding of time which has helped provide a duality and view of history which affect expressions in worship.

In the Greek language, the two most important words used to describe

³ See Clarence J. Rivers, "The Oral African Tradition Versus the Ocular Western Tradition," *This Far By Faith: American Black Culture and Its African Roots* (Washington, D.C.: The National Office for Black Catholics, 1977), pp. 38-49.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁵ W. Casperi, "Practical Theology," *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. VI (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1909), p. 500.

⁶ George Hodges, "Liturgies," *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. VI (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1909), p. 500.

time are *kairos* and *chronos*. *Kairos* refers to a moment of significance and may refer to special times such as the time of birth, marriage and death. *Chronos*, on the other hand, refers to the time between special events and may be appropriately designated as the time of sequence or chronology. Because of this, *kairos* is always looked upon as the better time, the time of special or significant event.⁷

In Greek philosophy, there were two unique characteristics of time. In the first instance, time as bound to creation is separated from timelessness as above creation. Because of this separation, that which is eternal or above time cannot enter into time. Consequently, time has no eternal or ontological meaning. It is a prison in which a human being is held.

The second emphasis among the Greeks was the idea that time is cyclical. It has no goal. It is not proceeding toward a final moment (*kairos*) that will give meaning and purpose to the chronology of time. Thus, what has been will be. This is a pessimistic view which sees time as meaningless when devoid of existential events that a particular person may find meaningful for his or her existence. Worship based on the Greek paradigm does not celebrate life but seeks to escape life and appease the deity.

African-Americans worshipping within predominantly white Churches are affirming their right authentically to relate to their Church while at the same time maintaining an authentic relationship to blackness. They too are saying that they reject the belief that truth is found only in sight orientations or in dualities which separate the sacred from the secular. In 1984, ten Black Roman Catholic Bishops wrote an official Roman Catholic document witnessing to their Black identity in the context of a predominantly white European dominated structure. One of their articles witnesses to the holistic experience of black worship which the Black Bishops wish to maintain.

Black spirituality, in contrast with much of western tradition, is holistic. Like the biblical tradition, there is no dualism. Divisions between intellect and emotion, spirit and body, action and contemplation, individual and community, sacred and secular are foreign to us. In keeping with our African heritage, we are not ashamed of our emotions. For us the religious experience is an experience of the whole human being, both the feelings and the intellect, the heart as well as the head. Moreover, we find foreign any notion that the body is evil. We find our own holistic spiritual approach to be in accord with the scriptures and the logic of the incarnation.⁸

Unique Worship Expressions Among African-Americans

The fact that Black people have a uniqueness of expression in worship

⁷ See Colin Brown, ed., "Kairos," *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), 3:83ff.

⁸ "What We Have Seen and Heard," *Origins* 14 (October 1984): 277.

from the larger society is today beyond dispute. This uniqueness stems from the influence of Africa on African-Americans and the influence of being persons who have lived in Western culture on the margins. The eminent Black sociologist C. Eric Lincoln succinctly expressed this uniqueness:

The uniqueness of the Black Church inheres not in its blackness *per se*, and not in any claim to being non-Western, but in the peculiar experience of being in the West and of the West but excluded from participating in it, and possibly corrupted by the salience of Western culture during the critical centuries in which the ascendancy of the West was confirmed, and the culture cast of the West was finally determined. In being left out while forced to look on, the religious perspectives and the spiritual experience of black people in the West cannot be identical to that of their white counterparts.⁹

When a trained white singer, who knows all the right musical terminology, the right tonal qualities, the right breathing patterns and proper enunciation, sings "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen," a black audience may not be moved to tears. On the other hand, let a black singer, who knows that the rent is due and there is no money to pay it; who knows that the children must be fed but there is no job to be found; who sees the children dying daily on drugs, alcohol, bad health, apathy—let that person sing and one senses not the right form of music but the quality of sincerity which arises from one who experientially knows that "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen." There is a uniqueness of expression as a result of living on the margins.

Marginality and Slavery

Living on the margins began in slavery. Africans became slaves under an experience of detachment and shock composed of several stages: the capture in native wars and raids, the long march of many weeks to the seas, the sale to European slavers (except those abandoned to starvation), the Middle Passage of about two months, and the introduction to the West Indies involving the experience of sale and manhandling.

The stage was set for marginalization in America as one can readily detect in the thoroughness of the attempt to depersonalize and deemphasize previous knowledge of the slave. If the slave could be made to deny the past and not be allowed to participate in the present environment, the hope was that there would be nothing to sing about but what those in power dictated. A glance at a few features of this developed slave system will show how the plan was implemented. The family was destroyed by law, the marriage of slaves having no standing under the

⁹ C. Eric Lincoln, "Aspects of American Pluralism," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 1 (Spring 1974): 26.

law. The understanding among Southern courts was universal that the father of a slave was unknown to the law. Children, accordingly, derived their condition from their mothers. All discipline and control were practically in the hands of the master. There were laws against cruel and unusual punishment, but they were virtually useless because a slave could only testify in a law court against a slave. In practice, the courts sought to avoid jurisdiction, even if there were a murder. For all practical intents and purposes, the protection of the slave was left to the self interest of the master concerning his property.

Although some churches and concerned individuals advocated reading and writing, it was prohibited by law among the slaves. The feeling was that "ignorant slaves made good slaves." The self-styled masters knew that knowledge and behavior were related. While the slave masters conjectured rightly, their own understanding and knowledge was distorted by their own ignorance. They failed to recognize that the slaves had a prehistory in Africa before coming to the shores of America which gave a perspective through which experiences in America could be decoded.¹⁰ Furthermore, their oral culture in the midst of slavery placed them in proximity to the biblical history which has meant so much to their worship patterns.

The Influence of West Africa

If one wishes to correlate the West African traditional religious experience with that of the African-American, one can readily do so. Belief in the powers of several gods is the basis of the West African's concept of religion. Great Gods rule the universe and are accessible in times of decision, crises, and need. Uniformity of religious worship, tradition and practice is not the norm among societies in West Africa. Cult groups are organized in honor of the various gods, ancestors, and forces, such as Fate or Destiny. These deities, ancestors and powers are believed to control and bring order to the universe. The concept of formal religious worship varies among the societies since the object of devotion may be a particular god, an important ancestor, or forces that are recognized by the community at large.

Whenever the slaves encountered a concept of God in Christianity that

¹⁰ W. E. B. DuBois, Melville J. Herskovits, and Gayraud Wilmore among others seem right to advocate continuity rather than discontinuity between Africa and America among African Americans. W. E. Dubois, *The Soul of Black Folks: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A.C. McClung and Co., 1903; reprint ed., Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1961), p. 144; *Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon, 1958), p. 207; and Gayraud Wilmore, "Reinterpretation in Black Church History," *The Chicago Theological Seminary Register* LXXIII (Winter 1983): 30-32. E. Franklin emphasized the discontinuity. See *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), pp. 1-2.

was similar to deities in their African religions, they made the correlation. In general, they adopted those concepts and practices of Christianity which could be identified with West African religious beliefs and customs. The African concept of time was one of the influences upon those who came primarily from West Africa.

John S. Mbiti is considered an authority on African concepts of time.¹¹ He thinks that the African concept of time is two rather than three dimensional. The former view stresses the past and the present with little emphasis on the future. The three dimensional view of time focuses on the past, present and indefinite future. One's concept of time affects one's orientation toward biblical time. For example, the western view of time is three dimensional. Consequently, there is an emphasis on future eschatology when examining the biblical record. The African, on the other hand, views future time in terms of a definite time in the near future of six months to two years. The African does not make rigid distinctions between the past, present, and future which is so common in white thinking. Both past and future are brought into the present in a manner that makes it impossible to keep future reality from its impact on the present in practical ways. Thus, realized eschatology in the biblical record would get more emphasis in African thinking.

African-Americans have shown affinity for African thought regarding time and experience. This kind of thinking is in line with the confession of Howard Thurman who said: "I believe, with my forefathers, that this is God's world. This faith has had to fight against disillusionment, despair, and the vicissitudes of American history."¹²

Marginality Since Slavery

The fact that the African-American experience in the United States has been on the margins since slavery is so well known that only a brief reminder is needed. The overwhelming contours of the African-American experience may be summarized as follows: the period of political disenfranchisement; military segregation and humiliation; exclusions from and restrictions in jobs, and denials of promotion, restrictions in and exclusions from housing; segregation and discrimination in health care, medical services, and social welfare; frequent injustice in the courts; and exclusions from voluntary, occupational, and professional associations, schools and churches. Even in this contemporary era of relative justice of Civil Rights, we have exchanged a universal system of *apartheid* for a

¹¹ John S. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background* (London, Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 40-60.

¹² Howard Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1975), p. 13.

selective system which does not touch the black masses.

This marginal existence gives birth to experiences of fear, love, joy, hope, sorrow, guilt, loneliness, and struggle. These experiences are realities of life which confront us and shape our lives for authentic or inauthentic existence. In part, our worship as African-Americans is derived from our experience as marginals in the American context. Yet, we can never forget that our African experience testifies to the fact that we have always been religious people complete with divinities, rituals, prayers, songs, codes of ethics, punishments and rewards.

Anyone who has experienced African-American worship knows that time is not of the essence. The experience is of overriding concern. Time and place are seen in relation to the experience. This fact fits into the mindset of the biblical worldview as well as the African culture. For example, time and place are reported in terms of the experience of Jesus at prayer in Luke 11:1: "Once, when he was praying in a certain place, the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray." The essence of time and place almost dissolve in the context of the experience. This is a common phenomenon of Black worship.

African-American's Worldview and the Diverse Canon

African-Americans have related to their African and American experience in relationship to a canon of scripture which has extolled many patterns of salvation, patterns which affect the nature of their worship. In many ways relationship with scripture has been natural since those in the African-American experience show close affinity with those seeking salvation in the biblical record. In his paper entitled "The Usage of the Bible Within American Black Churches" Cain H. Felder theorized that ". . . there seems to be a positive correlation between aspects of both the Black church's experience and Biblical usage and those of first century Christians."¹³ This correlation is described in relation to "Negro Spirituals," "Black Church Drama, Poetry and Church School Literature," and "Among Black Preachers." One may contend that those on the margins among African-Americans display biblical affinities because they have been thoroughly nurtured in the King James version with its many images of salvation. Since African-Americans learned to read by studying the Bible, it is not surprising that the stories there meant so much to those who read and told them to the people. What amazes is that the diverse images of salvation in the canon were deciphered for the good of the community and appropriated selectively for the good of all. Let us look at some of the biblical patterns of salvation.

¹³ Cain H. Felder, "The Usage of the Bible within American Black Churches," *The A.M.E. Zion Quarterly Review* XCV (1984): 2.

Diversity of Canon and Patterns of Salvation

Scripture and tradition have given rise to various images of salvation which have shaped the nature and character of worship throughout the ages. Among the Hebrews was a theological worldview which depicted a transcendent God who was present in time through historical action. A diverse canon is responsible for a variety of salvation models some of which are normative for one group of Christians and subservient for another. We shall highlight a few of those models.

In scripture, there is the *Creation model* in which all persons and nature itself is considered of worth because created and sustained by God. The creation story in Genesis 1:1-2:4 has provided a basis for this model. Although the eight basic acts of creation are completed on the sixth day and pronounced very good, there was something still lacking. This is supplied on the seventh day when, as 2:2 states, "God finished God's work which God had done." What does God do on the seventh day that constitutes the finishing, crowning touch to this creative activity? God institutes the Sabbath. The Sabbath is the key to understanding Genesis 1. The day of worship completes the act of creation. This means creation is for human beings and nature in the context of their recognition of the one who created the world. God's glory is the purpose of creation.

The *Exodus model* says that human beings have to struggle to maintain that oneness established from having been created by God which is threatened by those who would enslave others. God saves from that condition. In this model, liberation from enslavement is the primary concern. Because they were freed from Egyptian slavery, the core of Jewish confessions extolled the activity of God when they gathered for worship.

The *Election model* stresses a manifest destiny for an elect people and the right of that people to take over another's land (the Canaanite land) if, in fact, that land has been promised by God. One has to be saved from the "enemy" who will not allow God's will to be done. The theologically elaborated belief that Yahweh specifically elected Israel above all other nations became a religious ideology around the period of Deuteronomistic history towards the seventh century. Yet, the model of salvation concerned with election is strong among the Israelites and has been strong in the American culture.

The *Covenant-Law model* is another salvation theme which advocates the communal aspect of that one people who are governed by laws, which considers all in the community as deserving of protection and welfare, and calls all to responsible action as a sign to the nations. The saving initiative is by Yahweh on behalf of people who have experienced the Grace and who desire to be faithful to their remembered history of salvation.

The *Priestly tradition* as a theme of salvation stresses worship as one

of the highest expressions of love and praise for the past acts of salvation. The community is therefore the community which remembers, celebrates, and anticipates the future acts of salvation, through song, sermon, prayers, creedal statements and sacramental acts.

The *Prophetic tradition* of salvation calls peoples' attention to the salvation bases upon which they were established: Creation, the Exodus, the Covenant-Law, the Davidic-Zion tradition, for purposes of repentance and reform. The events that have already occurred in time contain an element of expectation, of hope, of fulfillment, and even judgment. The prophets especially foretell the impending eschatological judgment of God against the nations and against Israel for unfaithfulness to God (Isa. 18:1; Jer. 4:11-12;8:1; Dan. 12:1; Joel 3:1-2). Beyond judgment is the hope of a new age. Those who remain faithful and practice righteousness will achieve everlasting salvation (Isa. 60:20-22; Dan. 12:1-3; Zeph. 3:16-20). In this tradition, formal worship has relevance only if it is accompanied by covenant loyalty.

The *Wisdom tradition* and its view of salvation seems to affirm knowledge and truth as means to earthly salvation, placing stress on human initiative in quest of creative exercises for oneself and others. Wisdom realizes the contradiction in life, evil, but is unable to fathom it. Salvation is thus viewed as wisdom in the fear of God.

The *Apocalyptic model* depicts salvation in its highest form taking place at the end of and beyond history. For the Hebrews time was not empty of meaning, for it was in the time oriented events of history that God was at work accomplishing the Divine will and purposes through the people of Israel. Time for Israel was linear, moving in a particular direction.

If the Hebraic concept of time places emphasis on significant moments in history as bases for finding meaning in all other *kairoi* and *chronoi*, Christians show a similar adherence to a significant moment which explains all other moments. Oscar Cullmann sees the historic and unrepeatable Christ event as that significant moment.¹⁴ The incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection is the center of history for the Christian. In worship, present time is sanctified by enacting the past event of Jesus in time which transforms the present and gives shape to the future. This celebration in time takes shape around the Jesus event and encompasses proclamation, confession and creed, Christian rites, song, prayer and discipleship.

The New Testament has many models for explication of the saving event. The chief paradigm is *Jesus Christ's death and resurrection*. Especially is this true for Paul who views this paradigm of the Christ event

¹⁴ Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Conception of Time and History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964).

under various salvation images. The ministry, passion, death, burial, resurrection, exaltation, and heavenly intercession is interpreted by Paul as salvation events under the images of: justification, reconciliation, redemption/ransom, freedom, transformation/metamorphosis, new creation, expiation, new life, adoptive son/daughtership, sanctification, and forgiveness/pardon of sins. Jesus Christ is considered to be the one who saves from sin, death, law, principalities and powers, redeeming the cosmos.

John, likewise, has an emphasis on the Jesus Christ event bringing salvation in the image of "taking away of sin," "enlightenment," empowering human beings "to become children of God," giving a "share in eternal life" through the "resurrection." The Gospels depict the pattern of Jesus' ministry to the outcast, poor, sinners and the sick as a paradigm of salvation for those who need the good news now. The eschaton provides salvation for some as they look forward to the closing of this evil age and the coming good age. It is the Church which has the "key to the reign of God" which has been entered into by some for their salvation which must extend to all nations. For others, who stress Acts of the Apostles, salvation for all the nations must effectively find implementation through the Spirit's pleading, drawing, indwelling, and sustaining power.

One should note that the Hebraic and New Testament understanding of salvation leads to worship celebrating the presence of the eternal in time. God, who created time, is active in time, moving it toward the fulfillment that God intends. Consequently, time is an integral structure of God's reality. For this reason, events in time have real and ultimate meaning for salvation. They are not the result of chance but an evidence of God's benevolent care and purpose for the creation which belongs to God.

Salvation: Consequences for Worship

From as far back as the Old Testament period in Jewish history, worship was central in the religious life of Israel. It was viewed as the means whereby persons might collectively lift their thoughts to the one true God and "prostrate their souls before God in adoration." Because worship enacted the past events (*kairoi*) and made them present, the marking of time in worship was an indispensable feature of Old Testament faith: in the yearly circle the festivals of Passover, the Feasts of Weeks, the Feast of Tabernacles, as well as the lesser feasts; in the weekly cycle the Sabbath; and in the daily cycle the prayers of morning and evening all celebrated the action of God in history. The enactment of these historic events sanctified the present moment, gathering it up into the eternal meaning of that event which represented the presence of the tran-

scendent and eternal God in time. Furthermore, in worship, Israel anticipated the fulfillment of worship in the dawning of the new age.¹⁵

During the period of the New Testament, prior to the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, both temple and synagogue attendance had become established patterns of worship for Jews. Biblical references with respect to the worship habits of Jewish Christians indicate that they continued to adhere to the pattern of attending both the temple and the synagogue. Paul, for instance, worshipped in the temple (Acts 22:17) and, at the same time maintained relationship with the synagogue in Jerusalem as well as outside of Jerusalem until he was eventually forced out of the synagogue setting (Acts 18:6f). In general, however, temple worship for the Jews had begun to take second place to worship in the synagogue. In addition, the temple represented from the Old Testament period a sacrificial form of worship which the Christian community gradually began to recognize as no longer necessary in light of their understanding of the sacrificial meaning of Jesus' death on the cross. Place was no longer of significance for Christians. Christ became the temple where God and human beings met. The divine presence which Israel once found in the tabernacle and temple was now found in Christ.

Crises and Synagogue Worship

The origin of the synagogue is not quite certain. More than likely, it dates from the period of the exile when Jews were no longer able to worship in the Jerusalem temple. The oldest witness to synagogue worship with its focus on the liturgy of the Word, i.e., prayer and scriptural reading, occurs in Nehemiah, Chap. 8. This biblical account from the Second Temple Period describes a public gathering for worship on the holy day of the New Year. In this account, the assembly (*qahal*) gathers in the city square of Jerusalem and not in the Temple area. The people participate in a Torah reading, around a wooden pulpit erected specifically for this purpose (v. 8). The people did not gather at a sacrificial service conducted by priest at the altar, as it is usually depicted in similar biblical accounts. Nehemiah wishes to describe an alternative parallel development in the religious life of the Judean community of the Second Temple time. He is presenting the synagogue model of worship that in all probability emerged during the exilic period.¹⁶ This worship form emerged out of a crisis situation. The synagogue, was non-sacrificial and non-sacramental in nature, emphasizing reading and instruction as the

¹⁵ See Abraham Millgram, *Jewish Worship* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1971).

¹⁶ See W. Schrage, "Synagogue," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel and G. Friederick, English Trans. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972).

focal point in worship.¹⁷

Christian Worship

Gradually, the Christians separated from the Jewish context out of which they had come. Ironic as it may appear, the Christians separated from the Synagogues through their worship activities. In the Jewish synagogues, the Jews inserted into their synagogue prayers, specifically the Eighteen Benedictions, the curse upon Christians or "Nazoreans and heretics."¹⁸ Since the Jewish Christians could not pray for their own condemnation and some remained silent when the prayers were recited, Christians were those who were not easily identified. While Christians were Jews became separated through worship, the worship among Christians, however, was influenced by the Jewish worship which had been so much a part of their heritage. They had met in homes in which they celebrated the Sabbath *Seder* or supper and, most especially, the annual Passover meal; in the Temple, where prayers and sacrifices were offered; and in the Synagogue where persons engaged in scripture readings, prayers, singing of Psalms, a sermon without ceremony, collection for the poor, and a benediction. It is from the synagogue that the Christian community inherited most of its form of worship.¹⁹

House Worship

House worship was common in the early Christian community. Acts tells us that in addition to the Temple worship, Christians had special meetings in their homes which included the "breaking of bread" as part of a common meal (Acts 2:46). The common meal was their way of sharing food so that no one would go hungry, no matter how poor. In another passage, their life as Christians is described: "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." The Christians developed a partnership through worship in homes which stressed a kind of extended family image so common also among persons in the African-American Church.

Since the Bible is full of worship images, one can best get a glimpse of the early Christian worship through an explication of the Church community of Corinth. This was a spirit-filled community which exemplified much that is said to be a pattern for many Church communities today,

¹⁷ C. F. D. Moule, *Worship in the New Testament* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1961), p. 12.

¹⁸ See Leonard Goppelt, *Apostolic and Post-Apostolic Times*, trans. Robert A. Guelich (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), pp. 117-123.

¹⁹ C. C. Richardson, "Worship in New Testament Times," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976).

especially in African-American worship.

Spirit-filled Worship

Judaism and Christianity stressed the movement of the Spirit in the creative activity of God. Judaism and the Old Testament in general understood the Spirit to possess temporarily a person, empowering that person to perform miraculous feats for a limited period of time. Not everyone was possessed of the Spirit in this way. After Pentecost, however, the Spirit was conceived of as a permanently present force which fills a person like a fluid and which is available to all believers in Christ. One of the characteristics of the indwelling Spirit is that it grants to all whom it fills the various *charismata* (God's free spiritual gifts) to be used for the edifying of the church. The use of these gifts in the worship service, particularly as they were manifested among the congregation at large, paved the way for the new uninhibited character of worship exemplified in its extremity by the Corinthian Church.

In the Corinthian Church, the gifts of the Spirit apparently were in operation, but not without some misunderstanding as to how they were to function. The arrogance that is suggested with respect to the gifts in Chapter 12 seems to be in keeping with the overall negative image Paul presents relative to the Church at Corinth. Its members were guilty of "quarreling, intellectual arrogance, drunkenness at the Lord's Supper, licentiousness, and even incest and prostitution."²⁰ In general, there seemed to be very little harmony and unity among its members and the problem of worship seemed to be particularly acute.

There were some at Corinth who were accustomed to the liturgical form of worship as practiced in the synagogue. There were many more who were recent converts from the "paganistic" environment which characterized the city of Corinth. Many of the problems in the Corinthian Church, therefore, stemmed from this fact. The hellenistic religions from which they had been converted were noted for wild orgiastic feasts and for sensualistic rituals in which the participants would work themselves up into a wildly ecstatic and frenzied state. There is little wonder that as newly converted Christians, those from these religions would not so easily find the ritual patterns of the Jewish worship thoroughly fulfilling.

The edification of the Church rather than the individual is always, for Paul, the purpose of worship (I Cor. 14:5,12,16). Worship in the Pauline community allowed for great freedom and variety in the structuring of the services. There were experiences of great ecstasy; manifestations of spiritual gifts (e.g. discernment of Spirits, prophecy, speaking in tongues, etc.); spontaneous singing (Paul refers to this as singing in the Spirit, I

²⁰ Robert Davies, *Studies in I Corinthians* (London: The Epworth Press, 1962), p. 11.

Cor. 14:15); teaching and praying; and full participation in the service of all who so desired. At the same time, liturgical elements, such as "Amen" of the synagogue, doxologies as used in Judaism, and benedictions common to Jewish liturgy, were incorporated into the services to provide the proper balance of freedom and structure. The early Christian Church understood themselves as an eschatological Church, expecting the *parousia* to take place immediately. There was, therefore, great joy in the services, and much praise and thanksgiving, (I Corinthians 14:16). James Cone rightly states:

There is no understanding of black worship apart from the presence of the Spirit who descends upon the gathered community, lighting a spiritual fire in their hearts . . . There is no understanding of black worship apart from the rhythm of song and sermon, the passion of prayer and testimony, the ecstasy of shout and conversion, as the people project their humanity in the togetherness of the Spirit.²¹

The Word and Worship: Oral Communication

Jewish Scriptures did not give rise to the worshipping community, but the worshipping community through extolling the work of God in nature and history, appropriated in its own life the oral and written traditions making them authoritative for faith and practice. Because Scriptures are born in an oral culture, one is not surprised by the drama, poetic expressions, and lack of a desire to adhere strictly to factual details. African-Americans have understood this well. One especially detects this propensity in preaching and songs.

African-Americans know the *kerygma* of the early Church. Proclamation of the Word within the early Christian worship setting was patterned after that of the synagogue. The early Church testified to the action of God. For Christian worship, this is important because of the Word incarnate as epitomized in the *kerygma*. In 1936, C. H. Dodd examined the book of Acts and other New Testament passages and derived a number of the unique elements of the Church's preaching.²² In brief, he saw that the proclamation of the early Church was that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we see the fulfillment of the Old Testament hope. God has exalted Jesus and those who repent will be forgiven of sins. There is an expectation of God's presence in the life of the believer through the Spirit. One lives in anticipation of the future. Thus, the Christian lives in fulfilled time, in the time of salvation, and in anticipatory time. The Word as proclaimed is Jesus Christ, and is made

²¹ James Cone, "Santification and Liberation in the Black Religious Tradition," in *Santification and Liberation*, ed. Theodore Runyon (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), p. 175.

²² See C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1936).

known in the words of scripture. In worship, African-Americans celebrate through variations on the proclamation through songs, sermons and prayers.

African-American's Familiarity with Scripture

It is well known that Black people were nurtured on the King James Bible. The distinguished sociologist, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, in a lecture at Hartford Seminary, stated in essence that it is difficult for Blacks to critique the language in the Bible in spite of its anthropocentric bias because both black men and women were raised on this language and have claimed it as their own with modifications in line with their own situations. It is difficult to critique one's own even if it has affected one negatively. For example, the Hebraic tradition had a creedal statement found in Deuteronomy 26:5-9, which was probably recited in their worship:

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor, who went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there became a nation, great, mighty and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and the Lord brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

This creed came out of the context of those who lived on the margins of society but felt delivered by God. African-Americans also have a well known creed which could easily find expression in worship.

Our ancestors were great and powerful people on the continent of Africa. Africa once ruled the world. There, great and mighty empires existed like Egypt and Mali. Europeans took knowledge gained from Africa and enslaved the rest of the world. Our fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers were kidnapped, stolen like cattle from their home in Africa and brought to America as slaves. They were beaten, molested, and killed. Yet, all the while they were building this nation.

In their suffering, they cried out to God and God raised up leaders among them—men and women like: Nat Turner, Nathaniel Paul, David Walker, Sojourner Truth, Harriett Tubman, William Miles, Richard Allen, James Varick, Daniel Payne, James W. C. Pennington, Henry Highland Garnet, Alexander Crummeil, Henry McNeal Turner, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr. and countless other persons less known but yet of great significance. These women and men stood up to their oppressors and condemned their inhumanity to others. They told their oppressed brothers and sisters to fight for their freedom and that God would give them the victory.

The hope is that through God's mighty acts and wondrous deeds we shall be free. God will set us free as we are obedient to God and as we unify with one another and with those of good will in love and concern. Already we have been set free, according to the Grace of God as effected by Jesus Christ. Yet, our freedom in terms of justice has

been denied us. Laws on the books which have given us civil rights have not been implemented so we still live in misery, poverty, unemployment, and are under the control of those who do not have the interest of the poor and oppressed in mind. We must prepare ourselves with the skill, knowledge, and spiritual fortitude needed to be of service to our people and thus bring the living conditions intended by God for all the children of God.

Crises And African-American Worship

It has been said that the worship experience of African-Americans and the religious expressions of the Jews are based on the understanding of God in the context of significant moments in their experiences. Slavery and the overcoming of that experience is a chief experience of each tradition. We must remember that the worship of African-Americans and their alternative form of worship also developed in the context of crisis. African-Americans were forced to the margin of Church life in both the North and South during the period of slavery. According to the historian Lawrence Jones, African-Americans did not have

equal access to the ministerial services and resources of the church. Blacks were forced to occupy so-called "Negro-pews" (which were often painted black), or they were assigned to pews in the gallery. Frequently, they were not allowed to enter the churches at all, especially in the South, and had to listen to the services at open windows and doors.²³

It was not even unusual for African-Americans to be denied access to the Lord's table by white Christians. There were times when black people had to hold their own services in the basement of the church after white people had gone home.²⁴ More importantly, the slaves developed alternative forms of worship beyond the regular church meetings.

Worship Alternatives For African-Americans

Albert J. Raboteau reports several alternative worship experiences of those in slavery. First, he tells of the meeting in homes. In the words of Lucretia Alexander, we have a report of the recourse of slaves when they grew tired of the white folks' preacher:

The preacher came and . . . He'd just say, "Serve your masters. Don't steal your master's turkey. Don't steal your master's chickens. Don't steal your master's haws. Don't steal your master's meat. Do whatsoever your master tells you to do." Same old things all the time. My father would have church in dwelling houses and they had to whisper . . . Sometimes they would want a real meetin' with some real preachin'. . . They used to sing their songs in a whisper and pray in a whisper. That was a prayer-

²³ Lawrence Jones, "Black Churches in Historical Perspective," *Christianity and Crisis* XXX (November 1970): 227.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 227.

meeting from house to house once or twice a week.²⁵

House church experiences of African-Americans, under threat of persecution, greatly resemble the worship of the early Christians. They too met in houses and the worship was really a communal affair which called for commitment.

Second, Raboteau tells of another worship alternative, namely prayer meetings in secluded places—woods, gullies, ravines, and thickets. These places were called by some “brush arbors” and other “hush arbors.” A ritual developed for worship. The description of a secret prayer meeting as recorded by Peter Randolph, who was a slave in Prince George County, Virginia, until he was freed in 1847, is the basis for our report:

Not being allowed to hold meetings on the plantation, the slaves assemble in the swamp, out of reach of the patrols. They have an understanding among themselves as to the time and place of getting together. This is often done by the first one arriving breaking boughs from the trees, and bending them in the direction of the selected spot. Arrangements are then made for conducting the exercises. They first ask each other how they feel, the state of their minds, etc. The male members then select a certain space, in separate groups, for the division of the meeting. Preaching . . . by the brethren, then praying and singing all around, until they generally feel quite happy. The speaker usually commences by calling himself unworthy, and talks very slowly, until feeling the spirit, he grows excited, and in a short time, there fall to the ground twenty or thirty men and women under its influence . . .²⁶

For the life of the slave community, Randolph, in this same passage, depicts a truly healthy communal results:

The slave forgets all his sufferings, except to remind others of the trials during the past week, exclaiming: “Thank God, I shall not live here always!” Then they pass from one to another, shaking hands, and bidding each other farewell As they separate, they sing a parting hymn of praise.

The ritual as described above consisted of praying, preaching, singing, testifying, shouting, feeling the spirit, fellowshiping through handshaking in a place together where they could feel secure and free to worship as they pleased. While they muffled the sounds coming from their meetings with upside down iron pots and kettles, they were still willing to risk the floggings which would be theirs if discovered. They desired to worship in freedom and in their own style. Worship in houses and “hush arbors” as alternative places of worship allowed the freedom, consolation and hope for those living in conditions of unfreedom.

²⁵ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: “The Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) p. 214. See Clifton H. Johnson, ed., *God Struck Me Dead* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969), pp. 134-35.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 217. See Peter Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life or, Illustrations of the Peculiar Institution* (Boston: n.p., 1855), pp. 30-31.

Christian Rites

Worship among Christians developed in a variety of forms according to areas. In Antioch, they had one set of practices, in Alexandria another and in Rome another, etc. In part, the diversity was due to cultural differences. Yet, through all this variety one may see a common core which can be attributed to the Jewish components of Christian worship. Two of those common elements were the Baptism and Eucharist (Holy Communion/Lord's Supper).

Baptism

It is indisputable that the Christian community from the very beginning practiced baptism. Christian baptism is an act of initiation. Through it, persons are brought into a wholly new relationship. According to the words of Paul, we become members of the Body of Christ via baptism. He says: "For by one Spirit we were baptized into one body" (I Cor. 12:13). Christian baptism sets apart people as belonging to the people of God who are signs of God's faith and grace through Jesus Christ.

Baptism is not only an act of initiation. The book of Acts associates the remission of sins with baptism. If the brevity of the narrative in Acts is not misleading, baptism was a simple rite which followed directly on hearing and accepting the gospel (Acts 2:41; 8:13, 34ff., 10:44ff.; 16:14-15, 32-33; 18:8). Baptism in Acts was not a prerequisite for the reception of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4; 10:44ff) and there is little indication that Baptism communicated the Spirit.

John associates the idea of spiritual rebirth with baptism. Repentance as a present necessity was characteristic of John's baptism as well as Christian baptism. In John, water and Spirit is closely associated. By the time of the writing of John, increasing importance was attached to visible signs. Baptism was widely observed (John 3:5; I Peter 3:21; Didache 7:1ff; Barnabus 11:1ff.).

While Jesus did not baptize, there is a command recorded in Matthew 28:18-20 which commissions the disciples to baptize. One notes here that they are told to baptize in the name of the "Father, Son and Holy Spirit." The precise structure of the formula is not as important here as is the differentiation being stressed between Jewish, pagan, John's or Christian baptism. In Christian baptism one may need to raise the question which is so disruptive among some of our own Black Churches today: Should one be baptized only in the name of Jesus? We can say that very early, the Church practiced baptism to the name of Jesus as the seal of the faith experience. Thus, there is no evidence to support the view that use of the triune name would be regarded as any more or less effective than the simple name of Jesus. This is especially true in light of the fact that trinitarian formulas do not occur for baptism elsewhere in

the New Testament.

While the chief model for baptism was the baptism of Jesus by John, several different methods have been employed: submersion, immersion, pouring, sprinkling. Many churches baptize infants who are born into the Christian community. Other churches do not baptize infants. But virtually all churches regard Baptism as establishing full membership in the Church. Baptism is, therefore, a very important part of Christian worship even though it does not happen every Sunday.

The Lord's Supper

The early Church persevered in the breaking of bread. In the celebration of the Eucharist, and especially in the act of breaking of bread, the whole drama of salvation is crystallized. The sacramental act summarizes past, present and future time. We "do this in remembrance" of a past event, the death and resurrection of Christ. In the breaking of the bread, we also encounter the coming kingdom: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (I Cor. 11:26). In the same eucharistic act we enter into communion with Christ now. "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?" (I Cor. 10:16). It is participation in this celebration that the faithful continually apprehend what they learn in the Apostles' teaching. The faithful are also led to a renewed apprehension of Christian fellowship. "Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the same loaf." (I Cor. 10:17). In the Lord's Supper the wholeness of the Church as the Body of Christ appears.

Songs and Worship

Scholars have shown that throughout the New Testament are passages which have hymnic forms. It is without question that the Psalter and synagogue hymn singing influenced the development of Christian hymnody. The hymns sung in praise of God as found in Revelation 4:8 and 11, in comparison with the hymn sung in praise of the Lamb as found in Revelation 5:9-10 are illustrative of the Christian perspective. The Lord Jesus does not replace the Lord God in Christian hymns. Praise should be offered jointly "to the one who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb" (5:13).

The *canticles* of the Gospel of Luke are among the passages which have long been recognized as possessing hymnic and poetic qualities. These include the Magnificat or praise to God by Mary (1:46-55), the Benedictus or declaration of blessing to God by Zechariah (1:68-79), and the Gloria in excelsis or the glorification of God by the angelic host (2:14). All of these hymns glorify God's majesty. Others have noted

hymns throughout the New Testament which seem to be in praise of Jesus Christ. Most of the verses in the prologue of John have been described as a four-strophe hymn by Raymond Brown. Some have contended that Philippians 2:6-11 is an early hymn to Christ. The same can be said about Colossians 1:15-20, Hebrews 1:3 and Ephesians 5:14. In moving from Lukan canticles to the other Christian hymns, one gets the same impression as moving from Revelation 4 to 5. Both God and Jesus are praised. The praise of Jesus seems even more pronounced by Christians when they moved into the world of trouble and persecution. Christians early in the Church were singing praises to Jesus Christ who would bring the time of their affliction to its eschatological destiny. African-Americans have identified with this same faith in the anticipated salvation of Jesus who is at the center of time. Thus they too have sung in celebration of Jesus in worship.

African-Americans and Worship in Song

Just as Jewish songs influenced the songs of the early Christians, so did the songs of both influence those of African-Americans. The fact that we have used biblical images to articulate the African-American experience has been well documented. For this paper, I would stress the affinity of African-American thought with the thought pattern of the Jewish community. One illustration will suffice. As the community remembers how God performed acts of deliverance, there is a tendency operative in Jewish, and African-American songs, to celebrate as positive that which originally was negative. "Thank God for my problems, for if I did not have them, I would not know that God could solve them," is indicative of this negative-positive continuum.

Retrospective praise is also in the biblical texts. The biblical writers seem to put little stress on the maintenance of continuities or reconciling discontinuities in their report on the actions of God. They were not systematic theologians. Roland Murphy is right to contend that continuities and discontinuities are placed alongside each other without any attempts to reconcile them. He says:

The Bible pays little attention to what we call secondary causality. Everything, good and evil, comes from the hand of God. On the other hand, the responsibility of human beings (what we call free will) is affirmed with equal emphasis. No effort is made to harmonize these differing points of view . . . it is systematic theology, in the post-biblical period, that has attempted to offer solutions.²⁷

One finds these signs of continuity and discontinuity, for example, in Psalm 103. Great theological problems which confront human reason

²⁷ Roland Murphy, "A Response to the 'The Task of Old Testament Theology'" *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 6 (1984): 69.

stand side by side. One detects there “. . . the problem of evil, God's relation to the realms of nature and history, the issue of law and grace, the qualities of love and forgiveness, despair and hope, justice and oppression, death and destiny.”²⁸ One can praise God even in the midst of ambiguity.

As a community, the songs of black people were used as a vehicle for expression of the *kerygma* and the *didache*. We are told that the early church “perserved in the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42). This was the work of the total community. When the slave masters told African-Americans that they could not have ordained ministers, neither could they preach without sanction of the “master” our men and women still “told the story.”

We told the story of faith in God in our songs, as the fore-mothers and fore-fathers focused on the passion and the crucifixion. We chose to sing about the one who was “Whipped up th’ hill” and “nailed to the cross.” We chose to sing about the one who was “pierced in the side” and “the blood came triklin down.” And when slaves were rejected, beaten, and shot without a chance to say a word in their defense, they sang of Jesus who too was humiliated: “He never said a mumblin’ word/ He jes hung down his head an’ he died.” In Jesus’ death, black slaves saw themselves; they suffered and died with him. In essence, the songs which African-Americans sang in spirituals and sing today in gospels are prayers, praises and sermons. African-American worship stresses liberation, hope, and celebration of life in spite of negative circumstances. These emphases appear forcefully in African-American songs.

We have merely scratched the surface of the relationship between the Bible, African-American and Worship. Our hope is that a basis for further reflection has been established through this descriptive analysis.

²⁸ See Robert S. Bilheimer, *Spirituality for the Long Haul: Biblical Risk and Moral Stand* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 14.