

## The Dynamics of Black Worship: A Psychosocial Exploration of the Impulses that Lie at the Roots of Black Worship

Albert J. Raboteau in his work, *Slave Religion*, points out that our slave parents risked floggings to attend forbidden secret gatherings to worship God.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes these meetings lasted long into the night, and at these meetings the slaves poured out their pain, sufferings, and needs to each other and to God. Raboteau goes on to point out that these secret meetings were so important because they provided the slave community an opportunity to fashion its self-image as well as to help others as individuals to shape their self-image. The development of this self-image was contextual and evolved as they reflected on their own experiences, communal symbols, values and stories picked up from their African past and the Bible. In short, they risked their lives in order that they could discover for themselves who they were, where they were going, and how they were going to get there. This task could not be undertaken under the direct supervision of the slave master, however. It had to take place in secret, unhindered by meddling interruptions calling for conformity to the slave master's specifications.

One impulse behind black slave worship, then, was the need for a positive self-image. This self-image related to the sense of a positive self that had dignity and worth. Self-image was for the slave that personal and corporate definition of self that transcended the pejorative societal definitions of black people. Not only did the self-image define personal and corporate worth and dignity, it also defined a personal and a communal sense of purpose and mission in life. In short, black people came to worship during slavery to seek a personal and corporate sense of identity that could define for them their true place in the universe.

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<sup>1</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: "The Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 213-214.

Closely related to the need to find a positive self-image was the need for wholeness that the slave brought to worship. They sought to be whole and to grow in mind, body, spirit, and in relationship to God and others. Self-definition, positive self-image, transcendence of negative societal images of slaves and finding meaning and purpose in life are all dimensions of the need for wholeness. Yet, the need for wholeness helps us to envisage how all these dimensions are contextual and relational. That is, self-image, self-definition, positive self-regard, self-transcendence, and the need for meaning and purpose in life all are enhanced when the person participates in community and grows in relationship to others and to God. A positive sense of self, then, is relational and developmental, and it grows as one participates in a community.

A sense of self grows as one participates in a community that affirms others and that has a worship that affirms. Quality of communal life and quality of worship through self-affirmation are inseparable. This affirmative communal and worship quality in the slave community is what brought the slave to worship. In worship and in community life the slave found a place for wholeness and affirmation.

Seeking to define a self-image and to find wholeness as individuals and as a people are two impulses that led the slave to risk harsh and cruel punishment in order to worship. The self-image and wholeness impulses could only be expressed if there were viable options to meet this need. That is, expression of human need takes place more vigorously when there are opportunities to have that need met. There had to be those around in the slave community who knew that the risk of being caught was worth it if the end result was encountering within community the God who satisfied needs for wholeness and for positive self-images. Thus, seeking and finding the Divine Master in the midst of suffering was worth the risk of flogging.

The third impulse, then, behind black worship was the need to respond through praise and thanksgiving to a God who sought them, loved and cared for them, responded to their needs, and bestowed salvation, deliverance, self-worth, meaning, and wholeness to them in the midst of degradation. The slaves risked worshipping because they knew that their salvation was in the hands of God and not in the hands of those who held the whips. They risked worshipping to praise a God whom they knew had responded to and would respond to their needs. Indeed, worship was their response to a God who joined them in their struggle. Worship, then, grew out of their encounter with God in their midst.

From this brief exploration of the slave worship context three impulses have emerged that lie at the base of black Christian worship historically. These impulses are 1) the need for a positive self-image; 2) the need for wholeness in the midst of degradation, oppression and suffering; and 3) the need to respond to God's incarnational presence in their midst, who

brought about hope, meaning, salvation, healing, wholeness, and a positive sense of self.

These three impulses are not just the impulses behind the slave motivation for worship. These impulses are still the primary impulses at the roots of black Christian worship today. Black people will worship where they have an opportunity to gain a positive sense of self, meaning, healing, wholeness, and a sense of purpose to their existence. They will give up a lot if they expect that they will meet the divine Source of their self-worth and wholeness when they attend worship. Indeed, black people will turn out in droves to give thanks and praise to a God who responded to and will respond to their needs for meaning, hope, a positive sense of self and wholeness. Moreover, black people will seek out a community and worship service where they are affirmed.

Today, worship cannot ignore these three impulses and still meet the needs of black people. It is the task of black worship to respond to the corporate and individual needs for positive self-image and wholeness as well as to respond to an incarnational God who responds to and fulfills our most important needs. Our task as black Christians is to become aware of the depth of the needs related to these impulses and facilitate their satisfaction and expression in worship as well as in service within the church and outside the church.

#### *A Concrete Problem and Its Solution*

Black Christian worship today has, in many churches, sought to respond to the self-image/wholeness needs of black people through ideological battles over cultural forms and expressions of black worship. The goal should be rather to investigate how worship can assist people to discover their self-image and wholeness as children of God and how it can help people to praise God who is the source of our self-image and wholeness. Ideological struggles become negative when they ignore or obscure a real understanding of the three impulses that people bring to worship.

Part of the ideological battle is a failure to link worship form and expression to the lived life of the community. Form and cultural expression are always related to communal experience, and our task today is to improve the quality of communal experience within the total life of the church. When this happens worship form and expression become a natural outgrowth of lived life within community. More precisely, worship is an expression of the lived life of a particular community and its ongoing relationship with God. The problem in black worship in my mind is that we have given too much attention to the form and expression of black worship without giving the same attention to the quality of lived life within the total worshipping community. There is an imbalance in

emphasis.

Several solutions to the imbalance of focus between worship form and expression and the quality of lived life are for the black church to 1) understand the meaning of worship as it plans worship, 2) examine the historical communal ways that the slave community assisted its members to achieve a sense of wholeness and self-esteem, 3) improve the quality of communal life within the black church, and 4) create worship form and expression that reflect the lived communal life within the worshipping community.

### *The Meaning of Worship*

Worship is the response of praise, adoration, and reverence to God who enters the lives of black people and brings meaning, healing, sustenance, and wholeness to them as individuals and as a group. Black worship grows out of what God has done, is doing, and will do on behalf of people of color. Because worship is a response of individuals and of a community, it is something that emerges out of lived life and relationships. The quality of lived life cannot be separated from what the people do to respond to God's activity in the past, present, and in the future.

The response of a community to God's activity requires work by the respondents. Worship in its inclusive sense involves the work of liturgy. William Williman in *Worship as Pastoral Care* points out that liturgy literally means the work of the people.<sup>2</sup> Praise, adoration, and reverence are work, and they are related to the quality of communal and relational life developed in response to God's presence in the midst of that life.

This understanding of worship that involves praise, adoration, and work that is related to the quality of communal life can be envisaged in historical black worship. The quality of life within the black Christian community combined work and worship and involved three dimensions that can be called work functions or liturgical functions. These dimensions are organizing, celebrating and mediating.

Organizing relates to the black church community centering its lived life around the values emerging out of its encounter with God. One important value has been the agape love ethic on which the self-image of black people as children of God is based. These values are transmitted and reinforced continually through ongoing relationships, preaching, praying, singing and Scripture reading. They are part of the environmental worldview and provide the symbols and concepts for interpreting experiences within the community. In short, important values become the focal point around which the worship life and the entire life of the community is centered.

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<sup>2</sup> (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), p. 48.

Celebrating refers to the joyful affirmation and praise of God. It is the celebration of God's past, present, and future activity of caring and healing on behalf of black people. Celebrating is more than a catharsis of negative feelings that have built up over the week. While catharsis cleanses one's emotions so that an opportunity is created for God to enter a person's life, celebration grows out of actually being engaged by God and God's people at the level of one's frustration and having found God's activity sufficient for the circumstance. Healing and wholeness only result when catharsis is followed by encountering God at the depth of our need. Too often worship becomes a psychological release valve for pent up negative emotions that are incomplete. To complete the healing process, the person must be open to God's ministration during and after the catharsis. Celebration truly takes place when the healing process is completed in worship. That is to say, (1) there is catharsis; (2) there is openness to God's presence and God's ministration; and (3) finally, there is healing and wholeness.

Mediating refers to transmitting central values and their dynamic power and properties to those within and outside the worshiping community. The dynamic activity is God's activity and it relates to caring, healing, affirming and making people whole. This dynamic power is expressed through the values that organize the community's life, and these values are expressed in the quality of lived life taking place within the community and the quality of lived life of the church's members in the world. The quality of the lived life inside and outside of the church community gets communicated through the quality of relationships the church members are able to establish.

Mediating also relates to the work of creating an environment where people not only respond to God, but it is also creating an environment where people can encounter and be united and reunited with God continually. As they worship, black people are also continually being renewed by God's presence in their midst. As people worship, wholeness and healing are mediated as they take part in the life of God in their midst. Hope, meaning, and new perspectives are mediated also by encountering God.

These three dimensions of the work functions of worship overlap. In organizing there are aspects of celebration and mediating. This is also true in the case of the others. Each dimension cannot be fully understood without the help of the other two dimensions.

These three dimensions of the work of worship also help to set the proper stage for relating worship form and expression to the quality of lived life within the community. Indeed, worship form and expression must relate to the organizing, celebrating, and the mediating tasks of worship in the black church. What we do in Sunday morning worship must be related to the total lived life of the worshiping community. If it

is not, worship is sterile regardless of how emotional or unemotional it is.

*The Slave Way to Wholeness*

The link between worship and the quality of communal life can be envisaged by exploring the ways in which the slave community provided the context and the processes for each slave to experience himself/herself as an affirmed and accepted child of God. This meant that the slave community had within it a communal means of helping its members to experience a positive self-image and to achieve wholeness. The comments contained in this section come from an examination of the slave conversion tradition contained in a forthcoming book by my wife, Anne, and me called *Liberation and Human Wholeness: The Conversion Experiences of Slaves and Ex-Slaves*.<sup>3</sup>

The major question in this section is how did the slave Christian community help to affirm the worthwhileness and wholeness of each of its members? The answer relates to the community carrying out the organizing, celebrating, and mediating dimensions of its worship work.

The organizing task can be envisioned by looking at a youth who had been exposed to the secret meetings where the slaves "stole away to Jesus" in order to sing God's praises and to celebrate God's activity. This youth would join in with the singing and would listen to the grown-ups pray, testify, and preach. This listening activity would provide the youth some symbols, images and stories on which he/she could organize his/her own experience. These stories, symbols, concepts and images became the tools of interpreting and reinterpreting that person's life in relationship to the values held high by the community. In this sense, organizing in worship was a hermeneutical task in that worship helped the youth to bring a theological perspective to bear on his/her life.

There was another level at which the slave community enabled the organizing and hermeneutical task. At this level, organizing became closely related to the mediating task. For example, one day this same youth discovered a new and strange stirring in his/her soul. He/she was now not only an observer learning from what adults did, this person became aware of God's action on his/her behalf. At this point the community became empathic to the youth and identified with him/her by listening to the story that the person shared with the congregation. The congregation mediated affirmation to the person by listening and encouraging the person to tell the story in the midst of the secret meeting. The community not only mediated affirmation, but the mediation facilitated the hermeneutical task. The community gave further interpretative han-

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<sup>3</sup> Edward P. Wimberly and Anne E. Wimberly, *Liberation and Human Wholeness: The Conversion Experiences of Slaves and Ex-Slaves* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986).

dles to the youth where he/she could better understand and organize his/her life around what was going on. The stories, images, concepts, and communal values gave meaning and focus to the youth's life, and the community empathy facilitated this process.

In summary, the slave community provided a conceptual framework where each person could interpret his/her experiences. This affirmed the person as part of the community. It gave him/her a sense of having a link with the community. At a deeper level, it mediated a personal affirmation that was rooted in God's affirming love. This affirmative love communicated to the community's members that they had infinite worth as God's children. This affirmation was the foundation of the positive self-image and wholeness for each slave.

When this process of interpretation and affirmation was completed, worship moved into celebration. The youth was welcomed into the fold as a mature follower of Jesus Christ, and everyone celebrated what God had done within the person's life and within the community.

Indeed, there was a balance between worship and communal life in the slave community. We need to take a closer look at the mechanisms that facilitated communal affirmation and the content of interpretive worldview that helped the slave to interpret his or her experience.

The brush harbor was the name given to the place where the slaves went to worship. Most of the descriptions of the brush harbor in the literature lead me to conclude that a typical meeting was a small face-to-face intimate group. Not only was it small, there were opportunities for each person to express himself/herself and to have the rest of the people respond affirmatively. Moreover, opportunities were provided for people to express deep emotions through shouting and body movement, although care had to be given so that the noise would not alert the slave master to what they were doing. There was a "pot tradition" where the emotionally excited slave would put his/her head into an iron pot as a way to limit the "noise of joy." There was also the mechanism of sharing called story-telling and listening by analogy that was used by the slave to convey meaning, caring, experiences, and interpretations of reality.<sup>4</sup> This mechanism will be described in further detail in the next section of this presentation.

Important also in the brush harbor secret meeting was the content of

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<sup>4</sup> The link between Bible study and renewal within the black church has been demonstrated by Doctor of Ministry graduates from the I.T.C. program. See Marion H. Arnold, "A Theoretical Analysis of a Bible Study Group of Elderly Persons Coping with Change" (D.Min. Project Dissertation, The I.T.C., 1983); Grady Butler, "An Evaluation of the Process of Developing an Openness to Change in a Bible Study Group of a Black Baptist Church" (D.Min. Project Dissertation, The I.T.C., 1979); Philemon S. MKhize, "Evaluation of the Impact of Bible Study Group Upon a Group's Openness to Mission" (D. Min. Project Dissertation, The I.T.C., 1979).

the worldview that undergirded the interpretations of reality and the total affirmative behavior of the community. By worldview is meant the undergirding idea framework that gave meaning to the activity taking place within the slave community. The idea framework was usually composed of values that the community cherished and held high. Many of these values operated at the subconscious level and can only be inferred for descriptive purposes from the actual testimonies found in the slave conversion tradition.

The typical slave conversion story was like a three-act play where a need or problem was introduced; then an agent of God, normally a little man, appeared with the solution to the problem; and finally, the solution to the problem was achieved. The story always followed a vision in a semi-dream state which the slave described as a revelation from God.

The conversion stories had themes that were consistent from story to story. Most of the major themes were themes of salvation, liberation from sin, death and rebirth, wholeness, assurance of salvation, encountering Jesus the deliverer, finding healing in the midst of sickness, finding assistance in a crisis situation, and deliverance from the hand of evil.

Repetitive images also accompanied the themes. The most frequent image of the conversion stories was the image of Jesus the liberator and deliverer.

Examination of the themes and images of the conversion stories revealed a worldview whose content was made up of both classical Christian doctrines and an African understanding of the universe. The classical Christian ideas were the sovereignty of God over all of life; the goodness of God; God incarnated in Jesus Christ; a proleptic hope that the eschatological future of peace, freedom, and justice could be experienced partially in this life; God's self-manifestation or revelation through visions and dreams; and the need for repentance and conversion.

The African influence related to a view of the universe as made up of two interpenetrating realities. One reality was the physical and material world and the other reality was the spiritual world. Yet, these two worlds were not mutually exclusive, but they formed a feedback response so that each was informed by the other. The spiritual world often impacted the material world and conversions, visions, healings, and wholeness were often the result. A great deal of sustenance was received by the slaves because they believed that the resources of the spiritual world were available to them through visions, small community life, worship and many rites.

These Christian classical notions and the African cosmology formed the worldview that helped to inform how the slave interpreted reality. These ideas were organized, mediated, and celebrated through story-telling and listening within the context of small intimate face-to-face groups in worship in the brush harbor. Through the small group and its story-



telling and listening modality, self affirmation, and wholeness took place.

*Improving the Quality of Life Within Community Today*

The slave empathic environment and its religious worldview are instructive for the black church today. In a word, we must begin to improve the quality of care within small groups so that worship can be an expression of the quality of lived life. Moreover, the small groups must be a place where the Christian worldview provides the basic tools for helping people to find personal affirmation and wholeness. Church growth and renewal is taking place because people are finding their needs for affirmation and wholeness met through Bible study and prayer.<sup>5</sup> The small group has become a very vital vehicle for improving the quality of lived life. When more and more of the congregation is engaged in the small group life of the church, the quality of worship will reflect the quality of life.

As already mentioned, worship in the slave environment took place in small groups of people where the primary means of sharing intimately was through a model of analogy—story-telling—listening. That is, this model was used for the purposes of the liturgical functions organizing, celebrating, and mediating. Someone shared their story within the small group and the community listened empathically. When the story struck an analogous chord similar to someone else's story within the small group, affirmation and celebration occurred. The story of the story-teller had to ring true with other similar stories to be authentic. When the story proved to be authentic, the person's experience and story were affirmed. Through this method, identities were affirmed, interpretations of stories were corrected in the light of the community's experience, and caring was demonstrated.

Like the slave method, many churches are finding that the small group is the primary means where the gospel can affirm selfhood and Christian character is formed. In fact, there would be no real church growth and quality of lived life without the small group today.

The major task of small groups today is to improve the quality of lived life within the church for as many people as possible. In this way, people can come to know personally the care and love of God operating through the power of the Holy Spirit in the midst of community.

Another task of the small group is to help people look at themselves through the eyes of God revealed through others and the Scriptures. This is a very strong impulse today just as it was for the slaves. People need to examine their lives and their experiences in a supportive environment in light of the gospel message. This takes place best in small groups, and

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<sup>5</sup> Wimberly and Wimberly, *Liberation and Wholeness*, p. 83.

lends itself to growing in mind, body, spirit, and in relationship to God and others.

The model of small groups for black churches to improve the quality of lived life is the small slave secret meeting.<sup>6</sup> These groups provided practical models of sustaining relationships of support, empathy and group presence to persons in need, guidance for practical matters of life, and practical examples of opportunities for persons to care for others. These small groups provided examples of leadership, models for interpreting life in light of the gospel, spiritual guides, and symbols and stories that gave meaning to a theological perspective to life. In summary, the small group experience during slavery can point us to a vital renewal of the church and its worship experience. It is a natural means for developing positive self-images and mediating wholeness.

### *Creating Worship Expressions*

A critical issue is how the small group experience relates to the gathered community celebration. The modern phenomenon is that the local black church is on the whole not the small plantation group of people that slipped away for a secret worship service. The slave community small gathering combined worship as well as the other face-to-face functions in an intimate small group. Today, however, connecting the experiences of the small group to the communal expressions of worship on Sunday morning becomes a real challenge because these two aspects are not as intimately related as in the days of slavery.

The slave Christian experience has provided an example that we can follow here. The slave narrative materials are full of examples of songs that emerged spontaneously out of the communal life in the small groups.

One example comes from the testimony of Anderson and Minerva Edwards, a black Baptist preacher and his wife who were slaves in Texas.

We didn't have no song books and the Lord done give us our songs and when we sang them at night it jus whispering so nobody hear us. One song went like this.

"My knee bones am aching,  
my body's rachin with pain,  
I lieve I'm a chile of God, and this ain't my home,  
cause Heaven's my aim."<sup>7</sup>

Another example of a spontaneous song was "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," but as one slave respondent said, "Us sing 'Sweet Chariot' but

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 69-85.

<sup>7</sup> George P. Rawick, ed. *The American Slave; A Composite Autobiography*, Vol. 4, Part II, of the Texas Narrative (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Co., 1972), p. 5.

us didn't sing it like dese days."<sup>8</sup> This statement referred to slavery days, but the statement was made in the 1930s. The song they sang had the following words:

Swing low, sweet chariot,  
Freely let me into rest,  
I don't want to stay here no longer,  
Swing low, sweet chariot,  
when Gabriel make las alarm,  
Cause I don't want to stay here no longer.

Most of these songs originated spontaneously out of the lived life experience of people in small groups. This same human occurrence is possible today.

Communal life and experience must find expression in worship on Sunday morning; it is the logical place for the essence of the communal life in the small group to come into full expression. Thus, worship as the work of the people through organizing, celebrating, and mediating the central values and dynamics of the faith can draw on the lived experience within the church.

Small group life consists of personal confessions, forgiving of sins, intercession in prayer on behalf of others and the community, Bible study, building up and encouraging others and singing. Often emerging out of these experiences are prayer needs, stories of conversions and God's work, stories of growth, development and wholeness, poems, and inspirational words that can be set to music. These group creations, expressions, and stories can become part of the larger worship experience with the proper coordination, sensitivity to privacy, and planning. How this can be accomplished is the subject of this section. The goal is to relate the quality of life taking place in the lived life to renewal in worship.

Depending on the polity, tradition, doctrine of the black church and the denomination, the pastor and a worship committee need to have a vital link with the small groups. This can be accomplished by several means. The small group leaders could report the prayer needs and significant developments to the pastor and to a worship committee on a continuous basis, or the pastor could find ways of securing the necessary information through periodic visits and contacts with the small groups. Once such a liaison is established, the pastor and worship committee could pay attention to the unique work of God's Spirit within the small group and find creative ways to incorporate these Spirit-led developments in worship.

Some ideas that could be helpful are: 1) the use of brief testimonies by people from the small group; 2) special times in the service to pray for

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

specific needs (taking care not to violate confidences); 3) coordinating sermons with Bible study and issues of the small group; and 4) special music could be selected that relates to themes and issues growing out of the small group experience. When special musical and lyric expertise exists, new songs can be developed for congregational use. Often new outreach and missionary concerns grow out of small groups. This could be a spark for special sermon series and worship emphasis.

The possibilities are endless for the worship of the small group to impact worship. Yet, this influence is not one way. The corporate worship influences the work and quality of group life also. It gives the overall theological and dynamic inspiration for the small group life. For example, five Texas conferences of the Eighth Episcopal District of the Christian Methodist Episcopal under the leadership of Bishop C.D. Coleman, meet jointly for one week during the summer at Texas College for a Christian Workers School. Each day at noon there is corporate worship for the over six hundred participants. In the morning there are large classes for the ministers, Christian workers and the youth. In the afternoons there are small face-to-face classes where there is more group participation. By the middle of the week the worship services begin to reflect the life taking place in the lived small group. This could be envisaged in the selection of participants, speakers and liturgy. Great care and effort are taken to have the worship reflect the activity and themes of the small groups.

Not only did the worship receive input from the small group, the small group was the place where worship experiences and ideas could be discussed and integrated. For example, toward the end of the week in the summer of 1984, there was a play on the book of Revelation. Following an invitation at the end of the play, 130 young people between the ages of twelve and eighteen gave their lives to Christ. That was quite an exciting time; there was great emotional upheaval taking place in each person.

Many of the young people did not understand fully all that was taking place in their lives. The small group and the noon worship service experiences on the next day were devoted to helping the young people to interpret and integrate what happened in their lives. Efforts were also developed for the pastor and church members to follow up on the newly converted when they returned home.

What took place with the youth in worship was linked to the small group experiences earlier in the week. Thus, worship and small group life were integrally related and mutually influenced each other. This example provides a brief glimpse of how worship and lived group life can take place in worship.

*Conclusion*

Three impulses are at the roots of black worship today. There is the psychosocial need for a positive self image as individuals and as a people in a negative environment of oppression. There is also the need to be whole and to grow in mind, body and spirit, and relationship to others and God. The third need is a worship response to a God who affirmed black people and bestowed identity on them as individuals and as a group in the midst of oppression. Our task as a church today is to provide concrete opportunities for worship and for community to respond to these primary needs.

The challenge of meeting these three primary needs has been hindered by our tendency to separate the form and expression of worship from communally lived life in small groups. Yet, worship understood as the people's work of response to God's act through organizing, celebrating, and mediating God's life and activity can be revitalized by connecting lived communal life and worship in more intentional ways. Indeed, worship form and expression and the quality of communal life are mutually related. Our efforts as leaders need to be two-fold: we need to improve the quality of lived life at the small group level while linking our worship form and structure to that life.

