

## A Response to Dr. Proctor's Paper

"The Theological Validation of Black Worship," by Samuel Proctor, is a vigorous, stimulating and somewhat provocative discussion of Black Worship. My response to this presentation falls under three categories: 1) The problematic emerging from the title of the paper; 2) The validity of the critique regarding style of worship; and 3) The reconstruction of the critical question regarding theology and Black Worship.

### *The Problematic of The Title of The Paper.*<sup>1</sup>

To speak of the "validation" of Black Worship is to imply that "authentic" Black Worship needs to be validated. Given the history of theology and the response of the dominant culture to Black culture, a part of which is Black worship, one could assume that this validation comes from outside of the experience of the Black worshipping community. This does not necessarily follow, though, for the author could be engaged in an internal critique. That is to say, he could be employing principles formulated by the Black religious community to test for validity. I believe, however, that this is not the case. Despite an acknowledgement of the uniqueness of the Black contribution to Christian worship, there seems to be the perception that that which is theological is given; therefore, "we are not about the business of inventing the 'theological'." I would submit that we are indeed not about the business of inventing the word, "theological," but we should be in the process of determining what is authentically a part of the Black theological tradition.

For so long, Black people have suffered under the white supremacist assumption that Black people are without culture, history and, certainly, theology. It follows then that Black worship styles have been viewed in negative ways—primitive and emotional—and presumably without any unique theological content. I would be more comfortable, then, with a discussion entitled "the theology of Black worship." I would affirm the

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Proctor acknowledges, in his response to my response, problems with the title of his paper and indicates that his discussion was a development of the title given to him. However, its content does not reflect any such dilemma.

authentic aspects of Black worship while at the same time denouncing its inauthentic aspects. The critical point is that the criteria for determining what is authentic and inauthentic would emerge from the Black religious experience as reflected in Black people's engagement of the biblical message.

At the 1985 Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches at Stavenger, Norway, much discussion centered on the question "what is theology?" Those who were in control of the theological status quo always presumed that they and they alone defined theology. "Third world issues" (including issues of the third world in first world contexts) and women's issues were deemed non-theological. A few years ago, the conflict would not have emerged, primarily because of the absence of third world peoples and women from such arenas. They have now arisen to challenge the presumption of the oppressors that they can do theology for the oppressed, and that they must validate the religious experiences of everybody. For decades, this presumption has been challenged by many Black Americans—a third world people in a first world context.

The authenticity of Black worship is not dependent upon the imposition of alien theological conceptualizations. There is theology in Black worship, and Black theology has not exhausted all of its contents. It is necessary that we emphatically and unapologetically continue the process of discerning the "theology of Black worship."

#### *The Validity of The Critique of The Style of Black Worship.*

In the paper, Dr. Proctor critiques the many inauthentic aspects of Black worship such as "performance" for the sake of entertainment. Essentially, what he calls our attention to is the phenomenon of "playing church." To be sure, anyone who has been in or around a seminary can appreciate this concern. For some of the brethren, preaching and praying have been used as tools for control of emotions. Nonetheless, the ecstasy and emotionalism which characterize much of Black worship are not at issue here. What is being referred to is the gameful manipulation of emotions for the purpose of personal, psychological and egotistical titillations. When this happens, form and fashion become the order of the day. God is no longer the center of worship, but the preacher is.

Although my experience of the phenomenon is primarily with the brethren, the sisters do not entirely escape the indictment. In reflecting upon this presentation, I recalled the sister in a predominately white seminary with whom I studied. This sister was a part of a Pentecostal/Holiness tradition which denied ordination to women. Because of her educational attainment in seminary, she was able to write the examination for candidates for the ministry; but because of her gender, she could

not take it. She was, however, minister of music. In a conversation one day, she revealed, "I can control the people with my music," she said as she proceeded to refer to a particular event in a worship service. "When things looked like they were cooling down, I'd pick up the tempo; when I wanted to mellow it out, I'd slow it up and soften it up—and then pick it up and get them shouting again; and all I was playing was 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' [gospelized form]. I can make the people shout," she boasted, "on 'Mary Had a Little Lamb.'"

Yes, indeed we can find evidence where liturgists, preachers and even musicians have usurped the role of the Spirit, rather than invoking the presence of the Spirit. The style of Black worship is probably most effective when it is Spirit-centered.

*Reconstructing The Critical Question Regarding Theology  
and Black Worship.*

I would like to extend the discussion a bit beyond the style of worship to embrace the content of worship. A reconstructed question may imply a different methodology for the doing of theology. The question, as Dr. Proctor puts it, "Is Black worship valid in the light of our understanding of 'God-talk'?" For me, the question is, "Is the theology valid in the light of the existential experience of Black people in the context of worship?"

Our knowledge of God takes on meaning and content not only as we encounter the witnesses of the biblical communities, but as God reveals Godself in the context of the believing communities (of every new generation) as well. The people gathered together as believers express in celebration, praise and thanksgiving the way in which God has dealt with them. The theology then expresses the claims of the community and serves as a reminder and a self-test in order that the actions of the community remain consistent with its proclamation.

Consequently, the specific God-talk of the Black community takes its content as Black people experience God as sustainer, ruler, caretaker and liberator. As the people respond to this encounter with God, their actions are judged by the degree to which they facilitate what God is doing in the lives and communities of people. Action, then, is followed by the theological reflection which, in turn, leads to action. Worship serves as a part of the experiential base for the theological expressions of the community.

Dr. Proctor has suggested, based upon the life and ministry of Jesus, four principles for determining authentic worship: simplicity, sincerity, trust and openness. I would suggest that undergirding all of these qualities ought to be the requirement of justice in relationships. Justice traditionally was a basic component in various aspects of Jesus' ministry and

of the Black religious experience. It had to be reflected in the worship experiences. That which is theological, then, is not locked into some privatistic, pie-in-the-sky spirituality as taught by many whites, but the theological is involved with the socio-political realities of life as well.

For example, the history of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (and other Black Churches as well) represents a working out of this theological understanding. Some scholars have argued that the break with the Methodist Episcopal Church and the consequent formation of the AME Church was not a doctrinal or a theological issue, but a sociological one.

Richard Allen and his followers rejected the view that theology had nothing to say about socio-political structures. For if he had not, he could just as well have sat in St. George, while suffering from the social and political evils,—for after all, the monstrous system of slavery had nothing to do with theology. But because he experienced God wholistically, and viewed God as being concerned about the whole person, the public agony of Black people was one to be addressed theologically. He realized even then that worship can re-inforce enslavement or it can help to facilitate emancipation. Because he viewed God as a liberator God, Black worship then must interpret the liberation struggles of the people from not only private sins, but public/corporate ones as well.

I close with two questions which emerge from Dr. Proctor's presentation (which includes his spontaneous additions to the paper).

(1) How do we arrive at an adequate understanding of the infinite God?, how is that understanding related to our cultural differences? Dr. Proctor seems to think that because Black theologians are not primarily concerned with universalisms, much of their theological content is invalid. I do not agree. The point of Black theologians and other theologians of liberation is not to negate universality but to affirm particularity. God works/acts in particular social and political contexts; and we live and have our being in a particular social and political context as we experience that God reality. That does not negate universality; what it says is that this is where the questions begin—in other words, it locates the starting point for doing theology. Historically, oppressed peoples have been taught that the only valid way to talk about God is to negate their own experiences. Black theologians and others have stepped forth to say, "No, this is not true." Hence, the question is, in what meaningful way can we talk about God? (2) What are the basic criteria for Christian worship? If it is simplicity, sincerity, trust and openness, as Dr. Proctor suggests, then what or who determines these qualities? What is simplicity for one may not be simplicity for another. Further, what are the basic criteria, not only for Christian worship but also for Black worship, and what is the relationship between the two?