

## Deliberations on Sacred Music at the Consultation on Black Worship: A Report

The Consultation on Black Worship, sponsored by the Interdenominational Theological Center, in Hampton, Georgia on November 21-23, 1985, spent a significant segment of the two and one-half days addressing one of the elemental ingredients of Black worship--Black sacred music. Most of that deliberation was prompted by "The Black Gospel Music Tradition: A Complex of Ideology, Aesthetic, and Behavior," a paper presented by Dr. Mellonee Burnim, and "Biblical Characters, Events, Places, and Images Remembered and Celebrated in Black Worship," a paper presented by Dr. Charles Copher. These two papers are included in this present volume, and herein is summarized the dialogue they generated.

The two fundamental components of gospel, its music and its lyric, both came under scrutiny. Rev. Marvin Chandler, himself a composer and gospel performer, complained that its commercialization has caused fallacious musical expectations in youth, such that, when he sings gospel to his own piano accompaniment, they question the absence of drums, synthesizers, and other electronic instruments. The discussants were in consensus that the commercialization of this "church music" has resulted in the debasement of what Dr. Samuel Proctor, in his presentation, termed "sincerity" and "simplicity" in worship. When this occurs, stated Dr. Proctor, the quality of community life that ought to emanate from worship is not realized.

Several pastors also criticized gospel for its jazz-like musical qualities, and because its performers occasionally dress and "dance" in a manner they found to be sacrilegious. Some gospel performers, it was said, apparently think that "singing for the Lord in the spirit" means that "anything goes," according to the dictates of the Spirit. At some point they have been misinformed that "spiritual matters cannot be rehearsed."

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It is true, responded Dr. Burnim, that everything which occurs in the performance of gospel is not necessarily favorable, and that there is a way for gospel to be executed so it does not isolate people. However, she continued, we must remember that the gospel songs of Thomas A. Dorsey, which are now standard hymns, were initially rejected from the Black denominational churches because of their blues-like musical nature. Furthermore, the Philadelphia church of A.M.E. Bishop, the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen, came under criticism by observers because they occasionally sang hymns to secular tunes. The case in point is that, in spite of the extrinsic features of musicality and movement in gospel performance, it is the intrinsic message of spiritual meaning which is of ultimate importance. This is certainly not to say that "anything goes," concluded Dr. Burnim; for, indeed, the Lord deserves the excellence of preparation, rehearsal, and controlled execution.

Several discussants, and Dr. Copher in his presentation, expressed discontent with the erroneous theology textually propagated by gospel songs. The problem partly exists, as one discerned, because individuals compose gospel out of their own, often unorthodox spirituality. Furthermore, if worship, as Dr. Edward Wimberly indicated in his presentation, is to be a response or theological reflection of what occurs in community life, then gospel songs should rather be textually this-worldly in their theology.

In defense of the cultural and spiritual integrity of this historic Black sacred music, Dr. Burnim raised two points. First, she indicated that hymns occasionally have questionable theology as well; so that gospel alone is not the theological culprit. Secondly, she insisted that it is the responsibility of the minister of music to evaluate lyric content, just as a minister evaluates sermon content. If erroneous theology is being musically propagated, she continued, it is basically because of ineffective communication between minister and minister of music. Both should be laboring symbiotically to procure the proclamation of the authentic Gospel of Jesus Christ for the salvation of the Christian cultus.

Father J. Glenn Murray, however, pointed to a precarious problem which apparently is not so easily remedied. When Black musicians, he said, transfer to the Roman Catholic Church from Protestant denominations, bringing their preference for contemporary gospel music with them, a white priest pastoring a Black parish often has difficulty challenging the theology of particular gospel songs, in that he is accused of being insensitive to Black culture.

Such problems would diminish, resolved Dr. Burnim, if our churches ceased hiring ministers of music "off the street" just because they are able to "play, sing, and sound good." Through this fallacious selection process, unqualified ministers of music undermine the spiritual and theological instruction which ideally should accompany the musical training

of church choirs. The church musicians we choose should understand (or at least be willing to be taught) the ramifications of worship and the part music plays contextually.

I might add that Dr. Burnim is exemplary of such excellence. As the minister of music for an A.M.E. church in Bloomington, Indiana, she reads the Scriptures and attends Bible study, thus enabling her to select gospel songs for her choir which are Scripturally orthodox. Moreover, the Bible study with which she begins her choir rehearsal, enables her choirsters to comprehend the criteria upon which her musical selections are made. This not only reduces controversy within the choir, it also keeps the ensemble in a spiritual and worshipful temperament.

Conversely, the problem is acutely compounded when the choir director's musical selections are determined by radio broadcast trends. Cognizant that all gospel music popularized by the media is not ideal for worship, Dr. Burnim sifts through numerous recordings in order to choose pieces which meet two principal criteria: 1) songs with textual messages which are appropriate for worship; and 2) songs which are technically performable by her choir.

Dr. James Williams, himself a minister of music and the director of the Stillman College choir, stated that choir directors must preplan their rehearsals. This, he said, keeps the process of music selection in the hands of the knowledgeable minister of music, and alleviates the problem of choir members insisting that the group learn popular pieces which the director deems inappropriate for worship.

Astute ministers of music are also more likely to bring to the training of gospel choirs the same dedication, seriousness, organization, and planning that would be afforded choirs which sing anthems or arranged spirituals. In other words, continued Dr. Burnim, there is no class hierarchy among the various types of Black sacred music. Hence, the choir which sings all anthems is not necessarily "better" than the one which sings all gospel. The consensus of the discussants, however, was that worshipers would gain the most from choirs which perform a variety of religious music—anthems, gospels, hymns, and spirituals.

Regarding this resolution, one pastor inquired about small churches whose memberships are too minute to support a substantial choir. Should those churches, he asked, consider using recorded music as a means of exposing worshipers to the variety of sacred song which the discussants have deemed ideal? The overriding response was that this would be inauthentic, for throughout American history Blacks have created music using only their natural corporeal resources. Such produced the spirituals, Africanized the Dr. Watts hymns, and helped the oppressed endure their condition. Rather than to tamper with the authenticity of this tradition, Dr. Burnim suggested that guest performers occasionally be invited to such churches to render the worship music.

Finally, in order to progress toward solutions to the many problems facing music in the context of Black worship, several resolutions were derived during the course of the various group discussions:

1. Worship services should be kept in constant check and balance, so problems emanating from erroneous music ministries can be identified and alleviated. It was indicated that the Rev. Dr. Gardner C. Taylor, pastor of The Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York, is thusly exemplary. His church services are video-taped and critiqued each week by his staff and him in order that model worship might eventually be attained.

2. Seminaries should offer courses in the ministry of music, so both musicians and ministers might gain the essential information requisite to establish successful music programs in their parishes. The Interdenominational Theological Center is paradigmatic in this respect, as it seeks to implement a joint master's degree program in music and religious education.

3. Musicians and ministers who have a sense of what worship is, and thus what worshipful song ought to be, should commence writing the sacred music of tomorrow, just as much of our current hymnody was composed by clergy of yore. This would provide posterity with a body of religious music worthy of the sanctity of worship.

4. Conferences like the Choir Directors/Organists Guild of the Hampton Institute Ministers Conference should be promoted. The guild was founded in the early 1930s as an adjunct to the Ministers Conference so clergypersons, ministers of music, organists, and choirsters could benefit from the information disseminated through lecture and performance. Such conferences could largely upgrade the quality of the music ministry in the Black Church.

5. Conferences composed of select Black Church scholars throughout the country, such as this Consultation on Black Worship sponsored by the Interdenominational Theological Center, should be maintained, so that dilemmas in Black worship might be ironed out and positive qualities perpetuated. The consummate product of these efforts is the potential reconciliation of individual and community life emanating from worship.