

Sexism in the Black Community and the Black Church

Introduction

There are not many black men in or out of the black church and in the black community who will confess to being sexist toward their sisters. To many of them the question of sexism is not an issue in the black community at all. It is usually perceived as a "white thing." Black men generally hold that the dominant issue that all Blacks must contend with is racism. All other problems must be subordinated to this more fundamental concern.

It is my contention, however, that sexism is indeed a serious problem in the black community and the black church. Because of the links between racism and sexism it is neither necessary nor constructive to insist that one of these must be subordinated to the other in the order of importance. Rather than set up a dualism between them, we must endeavor to be sensitive to both of these as well as to other forms of oppression and to see the interconnections between them, and the hopelessness of expecting to solve any one of them without making a serious effort to address the others.

Jacquelyn Grant maintains that black women "have to keep the issue of sexism 'going' in the Black Community, in the Black Church, and in Black Theology until it has been eliminated. To do otherwise means that [black women] will be pushed aside until eternity."¹ Black women must be self-determined in the sense of recognizing the importance of fighting their own battles. They need not wait for the approval of black men before they begin launching their assault against sexism in the black community and black church. It would be encouraging if black men had enough courage and self-security to reach out to black women and urge them to rise up and do whatever is necessary to aid in their own libera-

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¹ Jacquelyn Grant, "Black Theology and the Black Woman," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, eds. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 431.

tion process, but this need not be a prerequisite to action on the part of black women.

Any person who pays serious attention to the facts and is genuinely interested in truth must admit that sexism is no longer a "white thing" only. It is also a "black thing," and poses a serious threat to the black community and church. James Cone has written that more often than not black women report that black men—both in and outside the church—are insensitive to experiences of sexism in the Black community. In an address to black women students at Garrett-Evangelical Seminary in 1976 he said:

We cannot pretend any longer that all is well and that the problem of male-female relations is limited to the White community. It is in the Black community as well; and it is time that we face up to the need to speak openly and frankly about what is right and wrong in our community in relation to Black men and women.²

It may be difficult for many black men to admit that they are sexist toward black women, but their denial of it is no proof of its non-existence!

Contrary to what some may think sexism is, it is not a new phenomenon in the black community and church. This readily becomes clear if we consider the battles of three outstanding nineteenth-century black women. This will be followed by a brief discussion of what several contemporary black feminists say about the issue of sexism. Strategies that address this problem will be discussed in the conclusion.

Black Sexism in the Nineteenth Century

Brief consideration of the views of three black feminists of the nineteenth century show conclusively that the sex question was an issue in the black church and community during that period. Though black women were not always in agreement as to whether the sex question should ever be subordinated to the race question, it is clear that they took a strong stance for women's rights in general and black women's rights in particular. The Reverend Jarena Lee (born in 1783), Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911), are three such women. They were very religious persons who had a passion for the justice and liberation of their people, though to be sure Lee was more concerned with liberating souls than bodies. Yet she is an important figure because she was confronted with sexism in the black church.

Jarena Lee was born to free parents at Cape May, New Jersey. In her seventh year she moved away from her home to work as a servant-maid. She found in religion that consolation denied her because of the absence

² James H. Cone, "New Roles in the Ministry," in *Black Theology*, eds. Wilmore and Cone, p. 397.

of a family life. Having had a vision during a personal religious experience, she later heard a voice saying, "Go preach the Gospel." She answered that no one would believe her. Lee recorded that the same voice then said, "'Preach the Gospel; I will put words in your mouth and will turn your enemies to become your friends.'"³ She later had a vision of the form of a pulpit and Bible laid out before her and then dreamed of having preached the word of God before a multitude of people. Several days later, she approached Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, with her conviction that it was her "duty to preach the gospel."⁴

Allen, like so many black male pastors today, was not opposed to women performing most functions in the church, but he became rather conservative when responding to the question of ordaining them to preach. After Allen became Bishop he endorsed her desire to preach (eight years later). Lee described herself as the "'first female preacher of the First African Methodist Episcopal Church.'"⁵

Lee struggled with sex bias within the black church. Richard Allen may or may not have been sexist, but he adhered to sexist structures in the church. When Jarena Lee first approached him about ordination she was told that their Discipline knew nothing about women being ordained to preach.⁶ Since she suffered by virtue of being black, woman, and being denied ordination, she was clearly a victim of "triple jeopardy."⁷

Though many black male pastors claim to be progressive in their thinking, this has not often held true regarding the matter of women preachers and pastors. Jarena Lee must have felt something like this in 1836 when she wrote:

Oh how careful ought we to be, lest through our by-laws of church government and discipline we bring into disrepute even the word of life. For as unseemly as it may appear nowadays for a woman to preach, it should be remembered that nothing is impossible with God. And why should it be thought impossible, heterodox, or improper for a woman to preach, seeing the Savior died for the woman as well as the man?⁸

³ Jarena Lee, *The Life and Religious Experience of Mrs. Jarena Lee: A Colored Lady Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (Philadelphia, Penn.: n.p. 1836), in *Early Negro Writing 1760-1837*, ed. Dorothy Porter (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p. 98. See also selections in Bert James Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin, *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life: Their Words, Their Thoughts, Their Feelings* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), p. 138.

⁴ Loewenberg and Bogin, *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life*, p. 138.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁷ Theresa Hoover, "Black Women and the Churches," in *Black Theology*, eds. Wilmore and Cone, pp. 377-387.

⁸ Loewenberg and Bogin, *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life*, p. 139.

What is striking about Lee's statement is how she points out what can happen if care is not taken to insure that the by-laws of the church government and discipline are in harmony with the best in the Christian faith. She is actually suggesting that sexism may not only be a matter of attitude, but a structural problem as well. This means, of course, that not only would there be need for converting individuals, but of radically altering church doctrines, creeds, by-laws, etc., if sexism is to be eliminated.

There can be no doubt that there were similarities between black and white church attitudes toward women preachers in the nineteenth century, many of which may have been due to the socialization and acculturation process. Bishops of the African Methodist Episcopal Church were forbidden to ordain women as elders or deacons.⁹ The 1888 Geneva Conference of the AME Church based its decision in this regard on the view that, scripturally, one could not prove that women were ever ordained to be ministers. The writer has heard this view espoused recently by otherwise bright and sensitive black male pastors in various denominations.

By denying ordination to black women there seems to be an implication that Jesus Christ is but half a savior, since only men are allowed to be ordained to preach and to be pastors. It is indeed ironic that men would insist that there are no scriptural grounds for the ordination of women, when men had nothing at all to do with the birth of the one they preach about. When a white man claimed that women should not have equal rights with men because Jesus was not a woman, Sojourner Truth stilled his voice when she said: "Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him. . . ."¹⁰

Sojourner Truth, referred to by some as "God's fool,"¹¹ was born a slave in 1797 in upstate New York. Having escaped slavery about one year prior to the legal emancipation of New York slaves in 1827, she, much like Jarena Lee, underwent a powerful religious experience in which she confronted Jesus Christ face to face.¹² Some time after this encounter, Sojourner, whose name at birth was Isabella, told the white woman she worked for that her name was no longer Isabella, but Sojourner Truth. "The Lord named me Sojourner because I am to travel

⁹ James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984), p. 126.

¹⁰ Loewenberg and Bogin, eds. *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life*, p. 236.

¹¹ Lerone Bennett, Jr. *Pioneers in Protest* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 1968; repr., Chicago: Penguin, 1969), p. 116.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 119.

up and down the land showing the people their sins and being a sign unto them.'"¹³ She ultimately became an advocate for both the antislavery cause and women's rights. She was the first black woman to become a speaker for the antislavery cause.¹⁴ Sojourner had a tremendous passion for the liberation of all Blacks from all forms of oppression and worked indefatigably toward this end.

Sojourner Truth was among the first to note with clarity that the black woman is the victim of what Frances Beale has called, "double jeopardy."¹⁵ Rather than opt for fighting on one or the other front, *i.e.*, fighting for the liberation of Blacks in general or for women's rights, she insisted on the necessity of fighting for both, and that the rights of black men ought not be construed as being superior to those of black women.

I feel that if I have to answer for the deeds done in my body just as much as a man, I have a right to have just as much as a man. There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about colored women; and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before.¹⁶

What was right for black men was right for black women. She favored equality between the sexes,¹⁷ and was unwilling to place the rights of black men above those of black women. There were not many clear voices being raised regarding the rights of black women at the time she made her speech in 1867. She said that she may well be the only black woman speaking out on the rights of black women. She was not opposed to black men getting their rights, but just wanted black women to get theirs, too. "Now that there is a great stir about colored men's (*sic*) getting their rights [now] is the time for women to step in and have theirs."¹⁸

Her position was more inclusive and more likely to be followed by twentieth-century black feminists who hold that both racism and sexism should be eliminated,¹⁹ though it is clear that there are women on both sides of the argument. Both positions, however, have their roots in the nineteenth century.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a contemporary of Sojourner Truth,

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁵ Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy," in *Black Woman: An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade (New York: New American Library, 1974), pp. 90-100.

¹⁶ Gerda Lerner, ed. *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 569.

¹⁷ Loewenberg and Bogin, eds. *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life*, p. 238.

¹⁸ Lerner, ed. *Black Women in White America*, p. 570.

¹⁹ Pauli Murray, "Jim Crow and Jane Crow," in Lerner, ed. *Black Women in White America*, p. 59

was equally capable as an advocate for the rights of all Blacks. She was born an only child in 1825 and ultimately became an orphan. She was raised by an aunt and uncle who were free Blacks in Baltimore. Though Harper had a brief career as a teacher in Ohio and Pennsylvania in the 1850's, she primarily made her living as a lecturer. She was helped in this regard by Frederick Douglass, who placed advertisements in his paper, *New National Era*, that indicated her availability as a lecturer in 1870. Indications are that she was quite eloquent in this capacity.²⁰

Like Sojourner Truth, she saw that the destiny of men and women is linked together—that the one cannot move without the other doing so. Women, she believed, have a key role in this process.

So close is the bond between man and woman that you cannot raise one without lifting the other. The world can not move without woman's sharing in the movement, and to help give a right impetus to that movement is woman's highest privilege.²¹

Yet on the question of rights for Blacks as a race and rights for black women, Harper supported the position of Frederick Douglass, viz., that black men needed the vote more than black women.

At the meeting of the Equal Rights Association of 1869, Harper held that if black women had to make a choice between fighting for liberation from racism or sexism, they should choose the former course.

Forced to choose between race and sex, she must let "the lesser question of sex go. Being black is more precarious and demanding than being a woman; being black means that every white, including every white workingclass woman, can discriminate against you." Harper argued bitterly: "The white woman all go for sex, letting race occupy a minor position."²²

Yet it is quite clear that Harper would have women be free, too, and recognized that as long as they were not, the nation itself would never be truly enlightened and happy.²³

Though Harper went too far in suggesting that sexism for Blacks is "the lesser question," by implication she at least pointed to the fact that the question of sexism had been raised in the black community during her time,²⁴ though there was apparently no unanimity as to its relation-

²⁰ Loewenberg and Bogin, eds. *Black Women and Nineteenth-Century American Life*, p. 244.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Catherine Stimpson, "Women's Liberation and Black Civil Rights," in *Women in Sexist Society*, eds. Vivan Gornick and Barbara K. Moran (New York: New American Library, 1972), p. 639.

²³ Loewenberg and Bogin, eds. *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life*, p. 244.

²⁴ Harper was wise in suggesting that often white feminists were white first, and were often racist in their attitude toward all blacks. This same criticism has been made by contemporary black feminists such as Frances Beale, Bell Hooks, Michelle Wallace, to name a few.

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ship to racism and whether one or the other of these should be targeted as the primary problem. This is always the case when issues are set up in dualistic fashion. In such cases, the implication seems to be that only one or the other can be a live issue or that there are only one or two major social problems, and these have little or no relation. There is in fact a dialectical relationship between the race and sex question.²⁵ However, in the case of Frances Harper we can say that though her real preference was for the rights of both black men and black women, it is clear what her position was when forced to choose.

From what has been said thus far there can be no doubt that sexism in the black church and community is not a new phenomenon. It has been an issue at least since the nineteenth century. During that period there were basically two schools of thought, represented by Sojourner Truth and Frances E.W. Harper. The former was adamant in her belief that black men and women must fight against racism and sexism simultaneously. Though Frances Harper insisted upon the rights of all Blacks, she believed that since white feminists were often white first and exhibited racist attitudes toward Blacks, if forced to choose between the race and sex question, Blacks should choose to fight against racism, since this evil affects the whole race.

Contemporary black feminists tend to be persuaded by one or the other of these two schools of thought. In addition, there seems to be evidence of the emergence of a third position that was not present during the previous century. Consideration of more recent views seems to bear this out.

Contemporary Views of Black Sexism

The question whether contemporary black women do or do not view black men as their enemy is debatable. To be sure, some hold that black women generally do not view black men as their enemy. Rather they see the real enemy as those oppressive forces in society which afflict *all* Blacks.²⁶ On this view the sex question is subordinated to what is seen as the broader, "more important" race question. Frances Harper held such a view in the nineteenth century. Various other black women in more recent history have espoused similar views. In a taped interview in 1970, Dara Abubakari (Virginia E.Y. Collins) said:

I feel that the role of black women at this point in history is to give sustenance to the black man. At one time the black woman was the only one that could say something

²⁵ Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1983), p. 44.

²⁶ Robert Staples, *Black Woman in America: Sex, Marriage and the Family* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1973), p. 171.

and not get her head chopped off.²⁷

Abubakari asserted that the oppression of the black woman and the white woman is not the same, and that "the black woman is liberated in her own mind . . ." ²⁸ None can deny the controversial nature of this statement.

Renee Ferguson also affirmed the view that the woman's question is subordinate to the race question. For her, there are two major priorities for blacks. The first is the elimination of racism. The second is the development of a better way of life for the black family.²⁹ Once racism is eliminated, she surmised, there is a greater chance that ". . . the black family's stability problem will disappear and more black women will be able to give first priority to the elimination of oppression because of sex."³⁰

Because she is both woman and black she must not postpone or subordinate the fight against discrimination because of sex to the fight against racial injustice. Rather she "must carry on both fights simultaneously."³¹ Her femaleness and blackness are two moments in a single life. The absence of either means her self-destruction. She always experiences herself as a conscious whole, *i.e.*, as both woman and Black. The needs of her femaleness and blackness must be met if her wholeness is to remain intact. In truth, she cannot fight against sexual discrimination while refusing to fight simultaneously against racial discrimination, at least if she is to meet her needs as a whole person. The fact that she may be victimized on several fronts will likely make her more sensitive to a broader circle of oppressed peoples. Affected as she has been by racism, sexism, and classism it has been the black woman who has been in process of "developing a new comprehensive way of thinking about theology, church, and society" in her efforts to combine these issues in hopes that this will lead to a more universal outlook in the fight against oppression of all kinds.³²

Rejecting the either-or approach, many black women are actually following the precedent set by Sojourner Truth. Insisting upon the importance of mutual support in the struggle for full liberation, Betty Powell asserts that it is essential that this is not the day of the black man, but of all Blacks!

²⁷ Lerner, ed. *Black Women in White America*, pp. 585-586.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 586.

²⁹ Renée Ferguson, "Women's Liberation Has A Different Meaning For Blacks," in *Black Women in White America*, ed. Lerner, p. 591.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 592.

³¹ Pauli Murray, "Jim Crow and Jane Crow," in *Black Women in White America*, ed. Lerner, p. 599.

³² James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), p. 119.

We would never deny the injustice or abuse put upon the black man in this country. But, because we live in a patriarchy, we have allowed a premium to be placed on male suffering. Black women have also faced enormous hardship and pain, and rather than getting behind someone, we should be supportive of each other. Rather than being the day of the black man, it is the day of the black people.³³

In the final analysis all Blacks will stand or fall together. No black person has a struggle that all other Blacks should not be a part of and be willing to do whatever is necessary to eliminate.

For the black woman it is not a matter of fighting to eliminate one or the other form of discrimination, but both. Yet there is a sense in which her fight goes even further than this to include fighting for the liberation of all persons, regardless of race, sex, or class. To this point Anna Cooper spoke with the wisdom of the ages in a speech she delivered in 1892.

We want, then, as toilers for the universal triumph of justice and human rights, to go to our homes from this Congress demanding an entrance not through a gateway for ourselves, our race, our sex, or our sect, but a grand highway for humanity. The [black] woman feels that woman's cause is one and universal; and that not till the image of God whether in parian or ebony, is sacred and inviolable; not till race, color, sex, and condition are seen as accidents, and not the substance of life; not till the universal title of humanity to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is conceded to be inalienable to all; not till then is woman's cause won—not the white woman's, nor the black woman's, nor the red woman's, but the cause of every man and woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong. Woman's wrongs are thus indissolubly linked with all undefended woe, and the acquirement of her "rights" will mean the final triumph of all right over might, the supremacy of the moral forces of reason, and justice, and love in the government of the nations of earth.³⁴

Bell Hooks views Anna Cooper and other black feminists of the nineteenth century as heroines and models for present day black feminists, characterizing them as women of action.³⁵ They were deterred neither by "the racism of white women's rights advocates" nor "the sexism of black men to deter [them] from political involvement."³⁶ They did not wait for change to come. They made change happen!

Unlike both their white feminist counterparts and male liberation theologians, black women have been among the most willing to see the interconnections between the various forms of oppression, e.g., racism, sexism, classism, militarism, to name a few. This is in part due to the fact that they have been victims of these³⁷ and seem to be more inclined

³³ "Interview with Ginny Apuzzo and Betty Powell" in *Building Feminist Theory: Best of Quest*, ed. Quest Staff (New York: Longman, 1981), p. 221.

³⁴ Cited in Bell Hooks, *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), pp. 193-194.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, p. 119.

in general to be sensitive to the hurt and pain experienced by others. Desmond Tutu attributes much of this to "the faith women have in people," and their almost God-like quality to bring out the best in people.³⁸ Ashley Montagu develops a similar line of argument in *The Natural Superiority of Women*.³⁹

What seems to be a third school of thought—not evident among nineteenth-century black feminists—is symbolized in Michelle Wallace's, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1978). This very controversial book maintained that there is a growing hatred and distrust between black men and black women. This distrust and hatred "has been nursed along not only by racism on the part of white but also by an almost deliberate ignorance on the part of blacks about sexual politics of their experience in this country."⁴⁰ According to Wallace both the white man and the black man are the enemy of black women.⁴¹ The black woman stood behind the black man during his bid for full manhood in the 1960's, in hopes that once this was gained he would also elevate her. This, she contends, has not happened.⁴²

Wallace does not place all the blame on black men, however. She maintains that many black women are also guilty of perpetuating the ignorance which exists between them and black men.⁴³ She does not let the white woman off the hook either, and this includes white feminists, who have done little in any concrete sense to show their own awareness

³⁸ Desmond Tutu, *Crying in the Wilderness* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 120.

³⁹ Ashley Montagu, *Natural Superiority of Women* (New York: Macmillan, 1974).

⁴⁰ Michelle Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Warner Books, 1979), p. 27. Robert Staples takes issue with Wallace's views in his article, "The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists" (*The Black Scholar*, 10 (March-April, 1979)). He pretends not really to know what sexism is in terms of the black experience. He says, for example, that "we need a decrease of black male sexism, whenever we are able to reach an agreement on what it is" (p. 30). What is commonly referred to as "sexist behavior" in the black community "is nothing more than men acting in ways which they have been socialized to behave" (p. 27). Whites have been socialized to behave as racists. Surely this does not mean that they are not really racists! Arguing against the claim of sexism in the black church, Staples says that since the majority of the leadership in the church is male, while the majority of the members are women, it would be difficult to prove the existence of sexism since most men are not church members, "and could care less who is in charge" (pp. 27, 28). Staples cannot be serious. The issue here is not what non-church-going black males think about who is or is not in leadership positions in the church. Rather the issue is what the minority of black males in the church think about who is in charge. When one considers the number of black women pastors, denominational executives, etc., it becomes clear as to who black churchmen think should be in charge.

⁴¹ Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, p. 28.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

of oppression among black women.⁴⁴ She contends that white feminists who do address the problem of black women generally adhere to the myth of the black matriarchy perpetuated by white and black males.⁴⁵ She rejects Gerda Lerner's view that black women have a higher status in the black community than white women have in the white community.⁴⁶ Wallace would rather white women not interpret or try to explain the plight of black women. She implies that black women are in the best position to do this.

Wallace is clearly in favor of organized women's groups. Before black women attempt to unite with white groups, however, they should first develop their own cohesive groups, lest they either dissolve at the first sign of internal conflict, or be co-opted by stronger, better organized white feminist groups. On this point Wallace has been wiser than feminists who believe they are now ready to join white feminist groups.⁴⁷ Reminiscent of Malcolm X, who insisted that before there can be hope of black-white unity there must first be solidarity among Blacks,⁴⁸ Wallace implies that before black feminists begin trying to unite with their white counterparts or even with black males, they must first create a strong bond between themselves. They may then move in the direction of establishing unity with all women, regardless of race, class, or educational attainment. Though some black feminists rightly emphasize the importance of unity and solidarity between all women,⁴⁹ black women should remember both that they are black, and what their experience has been when they have tried to bond with other feminist groups prior to having developed a high level of unity themselves.

Wallace seems to suggest neither that black women fight for the liberation of Blacks as a race, nor that they fight for the rights of black men. Rather she suggests that in light of the way black women have been treated by *all* men and white women, they should take their future into their own hands and immediately begin establishing a strong, cohesive black women's organization modeled on their own priorities. Though this view is commendable it must also take seriously the fact of racial oppression suffered by the whole of the black race and the need for the united efforts of black women and black men.

Though Wallace's perspective is refreshing and challenging, we must remember that if there is to be real progress regarding the issues she

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 170.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Hooks, *Ain't I A Woman*, pp. 189-190.

⁴⁸ George Breitman, ed., *Malcolm X Speaks: Speeches and Statements* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), pp. 21-22.

⁴⁹ Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, p. 109.

raises, we must move beyond finger pointing and discussions about whether black men or black women have suffered the most. Clearly both have suffered (and suffer) injustice and oppression. We should simply accept this reality and move in the direction of concrete actions to correct it.

What should be clear by now is that sexism is not a recent phenomenon in the black community and church. It really does not matter that many black men continue to insist that it is not a real issue. What matters, finally, is that black women in and out of the church believe there is such a problem.⁵⁰ In her essay, "Preaching in the Black Tradition," Leontine T.C. Kelly was quite explicit about this when she affirmed that "the black woman preacher does battle sexism."⁵¹ Yet she is just as adamant that God is for her both father and mother. Here she draws on the black spiritual that says, "He's my father, he's my mother, my sister, and my brother, he's everything to me." The gospel liberates the victim from all forms of oppression.⁵² In this regard Kelly states that, "There is no way for a black woman to have understood the Christian witness of her people . . . without affirming her personhood sexually as well as racially."⁵³ In this she is in the tradition of Sojourner Truth. Black women, she contends, draw their strength from the strong sisterhood in the black church.

Bell Hooks takes the feminist issue to a much higher level in that she is aware that this problem is aggravated by the present economic system. She is quite perceptive when she suggests that the goal of feminism in a broad sense is not that of mere equality with men in a society characterized by an oppressive economic system. The aim is for a radical reconstruction of that system—a system that is the common enemy of all Blacks, all women, the poor, and other traditionally excluded groups. Hooks rightly sees that there is a need for "a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society so that self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires."⁵⁴ This is an important point, as it is now evident to a growing number of black intellectuals that one cannot really expect to solve the race, sex and class

⁵⁰ See Toni Cade, ed., *Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: New American Library, 1974); Celestine Ware, *Woman Power: The Movement for Women's Liberation* (New York: Tower, 1970); Michelle Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman* (New York: Warner Books, 1980); Bell Hooks, *Ain't I A Woman* (Boston: South End Press, 1981); Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Importance of Black Women on Race and Sex* (New York: Morrow, 1984).

⁵¹ Judith L. Weidman, *Women Ministers: How Women are Re-defining Traditional Roles* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), p. 72.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Hooks, *Ain't I A Woman*, p. 195.

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questions short of a radically transformed economic system. In addition to this it must be clear that there are other things that can and must be done if the problem of sexism is to be solved.

What Can Be Done?

On the question of sexism in the black community and church we must listen to the stories of black women. Not only are those who are not the victims of a particular form of oppression not in a position to develop "criteria to test whether it has been eliminated,"⁵⁵ they are in no position to say that it is or is not a legitimate issue for the black community and church. Black women who are feminists are in the best position to make this determination, and must endeavor to do all they can to eliminate sexism from the black community and church.⁵⁶

Though the problem of sexism and related forms of oppression will not be transformed beyond recognition short of a radical transformation of the present economic system, there are some practical, common sense types of things that can be done immediately in an effort to eliminate this evil. No one of these alone will be a solution to the problem. Yet all of these taken together, along with genuine attempts to alter significantly the present capitalistic system, will surely lead us further in the direction of eliminating this menace.

The *first* thing we can all do is respect the dignity and sanctity of *all* persons, regardless of race or sex. All persons were created in God's image. Though the creation myth teaches that God removed a rib from Adam's side and from this formed woman, as a person she too was created in the Divine image. That which was created in God's image has no masculine or feminine qualities. Further, in God there is no male or female, black or white.

Lerone Bennett, Jr., has written that the problem of race in America is not a black problem, but a white problem.⁵⁷ Black people are not responsible for the creation of racism and by and large have not been the cause of its continued existence. White people have created it; white people, especially the dominant capitalist and managerial classes, and their institutions have perpetuated it. We might similarly speak of sexism in the black community. This is the *second* thing we can do. The phenomenon of sexism was not created by black women, and therefore is not "their" problem. Though its existence may in large part be attributable to white men, none can deny that black men have been guilty of helping

⁵⁵ Cone, *For My People*, p. 123.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Lerone Bennett, Jr., "The White Problem in America," in *White Racism: Its History, Pathology and Practice*, eds. Barry N. Schwartz and Robert Disch (New York: Dell, 1970), pp. 251-159.

to perpetuate sexism in their community and church. It is because of this that black men must understand that black sexism is not a black female problem, but a black male problem, which means that he has a major role to play in its elimination. But he should not assume that he knows more about the effects this problem has on the black woman than she does.

The *third* thing black men can do is to strive hard to be good listeners and take the black woman's story of her pain and hurt seriously. Her story must not be taken lightly, or as a joke. It should not be viewed as an addendum to the black agenda, but a *bona fide*, legitimate issue that warrants immediate attention and concrete action.

Black men must endeavor to see to it that the sex issue is taken seriously by all who claim to be interested in liberating the oppressed. It is particularly important for the black churches and black pastors to take this issue seriously, since they are in a position to provide moral and spiritual leadership and direction for the rest of the black community. Even some black women will have to be helped to see and understand the importance of this issue.⁵⁸ When black women tell their stories of hurt and pain, black men should assume the accuracy of these, and even if it turns out that they are not true, they will at least know how they are being perceived by their black sisters!⁵⁹ Black men must not expect from the white oppressor what they are not willing to grant black women, viz., a sincere, sensitive, listening ear and the right to tell their own story.

As black men sensitize themselves to hear the stories of black women, they should also strive to be sensitive to what they do not hear. The fact that many black women are apprehensive about discussing the issue of black sexism should not be interpreted to mean that they are in fact satisfied with the way they are treated by many men. Though there are some black women who, because of the socialization process, seem to accept their plight, enough black women have spoken out on this issue that it should be evident that sexism is a serious issue among them. Black men and women who take this matter seriously should commit themselves to making a full scale assault against it. Neither race nor sex need be subordinated. Rather both must be addressed, with the realization that the full liberation of *all* Blacks is dependent upon the elimination of these and other negative "-isms" that adversely affect the black community. Jacquelyn Grant rightly contends that "the liberation of Black men and women is inseparable [and that] a radical split cannot be

⁵⁸ Cone, *For My People*, p. 123.

⁵⁹ Robert McAfee Brown, "Liberation Theology: Paralyzing Threat or Creative Challenge?" in *Mission Trends: Liberation Theologies in North America and Europe*, No. 4 eds. Gerald Anderson and Thomas Stransky (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 20.

made between racism and sexism,⁶⁰ at least if we genuinely intend to solve either problem. Because of the "dialectical character of the relationship between the two causes," either all members of the black community will be totally free of all forms of oppression, or none will be!

The *fourth* thing we can do is to register our protest when in the presence of sexist behavior, and with a strong sense of intentionality. Whether at our place of employment, in civic organizations, or the church we should never stand by silently when in the presence of sexist behavior. In such situations we should speak boldly and cogently against such behavior.

In the *fifth* place, we can take affirmative, intentional steps to expose the evil of sexism. Black male pastors who take this issue seriously should call attention to it frequently in sermons, and instruct church school teachers to include it in class discussions on a regular basis. He should take steps to insure that all male officers and staff members are enlightened on this issue. Black male scholars, especially theologians, should lift up the issue of sexism in class lectures and articles. It does not matter what the class is, e.g., ethics, history, theology, biblical studies, etc.

Sixth, whenever black women are conspicuously absent from professional society meetings those men present should follow the lead of Gayraud Wilmore by publicly acknowledging their absence and declaring the need to correct this.⁶¹ Of course, the other side of this is that black feminists must also reveal their own self-determination by making a greater effort to be present at such meetings in order to insure representation. They should also follow the example of the best in black feminist tradition and take the initiative to make change happen, rather than wait for it to occur.

The *seventh* thing we can do is to be both honest and self-critical. Blacks have been right in criticizing the white community and church for their complicity in racist, sexist and classist practices. Without giving up their criticism of whites, Blacks must turn that same critical eye upon their own community and church. As clearly as we see the weaknesses in the white community and church, we must strive to see as clearly the same shortcomings in our own community and church, and have enough character to be willing to take the necessary steps to remove them.

Lastly, just as Afro-American and African liberation theologians have

⁶⁰ Grant, "Black Theology and the Black Woman," in *Black Theology*, eds. Wilmore and Cone, p. 430.

⁶¹ Dr. Wilmore did precisely this when he made a presentation at an afternoon session of the meeting of the Society for the Study of Black Religion in Chicago, on October 19, 1984. Before starting his lecture, he observed that there were no black women present and that there was need to correct this as soon as possible.

declared racism to be a sin,⁶² we must take the same position on sexism. Just as racism is incompatible with the best we know of Jesus' teachings and example and denies the creatureliness and the sanctity of many of God's children, the same may be said of sexism. Sexism is a sin and must not be tolerated in any of its various forms.

⁶² Cone, *For My People*, p. 81; James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 39, 49; see also Allan A. Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition* (New York: Orbis Books, 1984), p. 103.

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