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## Toward a Common Expression of Faith: A Black North American Perspective

### *Introduction*

A special consultation on one common expression of the Apostolic faith from the perspective of Black Christians in the U.S. brought together representatives of several Black denominations at Virginia Union University in Richmond, Virginia, December 14-15, 1984. The consultation included representatives of the Black constituencies of several predominantly White denominations. In some cases the participants were delegated by denominational administrative headquarters; others were representatives of their communions without official appointment. The context of this document, therefore, stands upon the authority of the consultation alone and does not purport to convey the agreements of an ecclesiastical council of Black churches.

This document, moreover, does not pretend to be an exhaustive response to the Apostolic Faith Study or a formal statement of the major themes of the Black theology movement that has evolved in North America in recent years. The Richmond Consultation, sponsored by the Commission on Faith and Order of the National Council of Churches in the U.S.A., attempted to convey to the World Council of Churches and to other interested organizations what we, a group of Black theologians and church leaders from across the United States, perceive as a general consensus among us concerning a common expression of the faith of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. In the several working papers we discussed and in this report we seek to add to the worldwide ecumenical study of a common expression of apostolic Faith the distinctive perceptions and insights that come out of the historic experience of Black Christians in North America.

As Black academics, denominational officials, pastors and lay leaders

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\* Drs. Shannon and Wilmore were co-chairpersons of this consultation.

we speak out of more than two hundred years of suffering and struggle as "the step-children of church history" who have been ridiculed, ignored and scorned by the White churches of both Europe and North America. The truth of the gospel among our people, that some have sought to suppress or disregard, burns like fire in our bones. In any discussion of one common expression of faith we have no alternative other than to make certain clear affirmations to those churches that directly or indirectly participated in and benefited from the rape of Africa that resulted in the exploitation and oppression of an African Diaspora wherever Black people are found.

We speak, however, from our own particular locus in the so-called First World, where we are less than twelve percent of the population of what is the richest and most powerful nation in the world. But inasmuch as our churches and people have never truly shared that wealth and power, we speak as a margined Black community with a unique understanding of White racism and with strong affinities with the so-called Third World.

In this document, from an historic consultation in Richmond, Virginia, we make bold to declare that God, our Creator, has condescended through Jesus Christ, our Liberator, by the power of the Holy Spirit, our Advocate and Comforter, to convey, preserve and enhance the faith of the Apostles among the despised and alienated African American people of the United States. We commend to all who may be concerned the fruit of our prayerful reflection on the themes of the Unity, Holiness, Catholicity and Apostolicity of the Church of Jesus Christ as we join with you in search of a common expression of the faith.

### I. *Unity*

We affirm that the unity of the Church not only expresses the unity of the Triune God, but is also a sign of the unity of humankind that holds together in one family the diversity of all races and cultures. In the economy of God, each "tribe", each ethnic group and culture has its own vocation to bring its gift to the full household of faith. Notwithstanding the effort of some white Christians to disdain the contribution of Black folk to the faith and to its impact upon the institutions of the American Church and society, we declare that the meaning of Blackness as cultural and religious experience edifies and enriches the universal message of the Christian faith. Blackness, in the religions of the African Diaspora, is a profound and complex symbol of a diversified yet united experience: servitude and oppression, faithfulness through suffering, identification with the exclusion, martyrdom and exaltation of Jesus as the Oppressed One of God who triumphs over enemies, a passion for justice and liberation, the exuberance of Black faith and life, rejoicing in the

Risen Lord in Pentecostal fervor and in service to the "least" of Christ's brothers and sisters.

White Christians have too often treated unity as if it were only a spiritual reality. We believe that unity must not be spiritualized, but manifested in concrete behavior, by doing justice and loving service to one another. The cost of unity in the Church is repentance and affirmative discipleship (i.e., action). We have, therefore, a profound hermeneutical suspicion about any movement for unity that is dominated by North Atlantic attitudes and assumptions. We have observed that when our White brothers and sisters speak of unity they often mean being together on terms that carefully maintain their political, economic and cultural hegemony. Unity is frequently confused with "Anglo-conformity"—strict adherence to premises and perspectives based upon the worldview and ethos of the North Atlantic community with its history of racial oppression. Christian unity is, however, based upon the worship of a common Creator who is no respecter of persons, obedience to a common lawgiver and Judge whose commandment to break every yoke is not abrogated by the gracious justification of sinners, and upon participation in the earthly mission of a common Redeemer, the sharing of whose suffering and ordeal makes us truly one, though of many races and cultures.

Blackness is one of God's gifts for the realization of the unity of the Church and humankind at this critical stage of history. It has been preserved by God as a cultural and religious inheritance of the Black churches of Africa, the Caribbean, and North and South America since the mission of the Ethiopian eunuch to the upper Nile Valley after his baptism by the Evangelist. It is rooted in the divine revelation to our African ancestors who lived before the Christian era. It has traditionally celebrated the goodness of the Almighty Sovereign God and the goodness of creation. It has emphasized the humanity of the historical Jesus, i.e., his earthly life, example, teaching, suffering, death and resurrection. It confesses belief in the humanity of Jesus together with the oneness with God, the Creator, and the Holy Spirit, but understands that humanity in non-sexist terms rather than being exclusively of the male gender. It identifies with the shadow of death that falls upon the Cross as a symbol of suffering and shame, yet crowned with light inexpressible in the victory of the resurrection.

Thus, the meaning of unity is related to the meaning of Blackness for the Afro-American Church and points to its vocation as a church of the poor and oppressed who claim liberation in the Black Messiah of God and want to share the humanizing experience of suffering and joy in struggle with others who want to work for a world of justice and equality for all. Unity is possible only when there is acceptance of suffering under Christ's work of liberation and when there is commitment to his mission.

II. *Holiness*

The Black churches in North America made a unique contribution to the Holiness and Pentecostal movements of world Christianity at the beginning of this century. The Black Pentecostal obsession with the text of Hebrews 12:14 "strive . . . for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (RSV), and Black leadership of the interracial Azusa Street Revival of 1906-1908 in Los Angeles created the groundwork for modern Pentecostalism—the most remarkable religious movement among the oppressed communities of the world since the Awakenings of the 18th and 19th centuries. Although most African American churches did not originate from Pentecostalism or the Azusa Street Revival, most of them have been influenced by the Pentecostal emphasis upon the *ruach/pneuma* of God in their conception of the Person and Work of the Holy Ghost. Their understanding of holiness as a process of moral perfection is rooted in the necessity of a personal encounter with God that is manifested in both the ecstasy of congregational worship and the praxis of social justice.

Afro-American spirituality has to do with self-transcendence and is unembarrassed by displays of sincere emotion, but it is also related to faith and action in the world. The Holy Spirit moves, therefore, in the real world of everyday life, in the sanctuary and the realm of secular affairs. The Holy Spirit is not an abstraction of Trinitarian theology but participates dynamically in what it means to be a human being and to suffer and struggle with the assurance of victory in this world as in the world to come. The distinctiveness of the Black religious experience is that theology is experienced before it is thought. Moreover, holiness in the paradoxical sense of transcendence and existential involvement in the world, must accompany the act of "doing theology". Holiness is a criterion of the Church's theological authenticity. It creates a theology that is "hummed, sung and shouted" in Black churches, and contrary to White fundamentalism, has more to do with how Christians treat one another than how strictly they hold to Biblical literature or ascetic life styles.

On the other hand, holiness in the Black Church is not coterminous, as in some expressions of White liberalism, with frenetic social activism. Personal encounter with God as a prerequisite of sanctification and commitment to social transformation are both necessary, but the obligation to "give glory to God," to "glorify the holiness of God" is an essential corollary of the obligation to be engaged in "building the Kingdom" that continues to be frustrated by racism and oppression. The Black Church is sustained by prayer and praise. It exists in and for the glory of God and not the glorification of human institutions. We know that to struggle in the midst of the world is to experience the glory of God that is thwarted by racism and oppression, but we also know that we need to

praise God in the sanctuary in order to struggle! One of our Spirituals has the refrain: "Have you got good religion?" The response is, "Certainly, certainly, certainly Lord!" *Good* religion is, therefore, understood to make worldly things that were formerly dubious better, and *bad* religion ruins the best of all possible worlds where there is no acknowledgement of God's presence. Without holiness no one shall see the Lord.

Ultimately, the holiness of the Church is a work of the Holy Spirit. We affirm that the One, Holy Church cannot exist apart from ministries of justice and liberation. We also affirm that true liberation is inseparable from deep spirituality. The intimate involvement of Christians with the Holy Spirit is expressed first in worship that celebrates the manifest presence, goodness and glory of God and moves from the sanctuary to the streets where it empowers the world to goodness, transfigures its wretchedness and need, and creates the quality of life that is symbolized by the nimbus that encircles the throne of God.

### III. *Catholicity*

Although Afro-American Christians have customarily been denied equal partnership in the *koinonia* of Christ, we nevertheless affirm the universality of the Christian faith. Universality in the Black religious experience has to do with the particular reality of people in concrete situations that are dissimilar but inseparable. Afro-American churches share with all who confess Jesus Christ the conviction of the universality of God's love "from each to all in every place . . .". We recognize solidarity in creation, sin and redemption with all human beings and seek with them to make catholicity visible by overcoming humanly erected barriers between people.

We deplore the fact that the profession of universality has actually meant that the norms of what is considered acceptable to the Church had to originate in the West. For years anything that White Christians in Europe and North America did not interpret as catholic lay outside the realm of true faith and proper order. Such assumptions distorted the truth about Jesus Christ and permitted the gospel to be used to divide people rather than free them to express the fullness of the faith in their own cultural styles and traditions. It also robbed the White churches of the opportunity to correct their own deficiencies.

In the later 18th and early 19th centuries, Black preachers were refused ordination and their congregations were not considered in good order. Not until rebellious White Methodist and separatist Baptist clergy defied custom and accepted them as duly constituted ministers and churches did Black Christianity become legitimate in the eyes of Whites. To this day Black churches have protested any semblance of alienation or exclusion on account of race, class or discriminatory educational qual-

ifications. Unfortunately, the struggle for sexual equality has lagged behind in many Black churches and Black women need greater support in their resistance to subordination.

From the perspective of the Richmond consultation, catholicity has to do with faith in Jesus Christ, baptism, and continuing in "the apostles' teaching and fellowship" and in "the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). No person, group or institution that meets these requirements should be excluded from the visible Church or relegated to an inferior status by human authority, ecclesiastical or secular. The sin of racism, sexism and classism that refuses or discourages the fellowship of African Independent church or Black Holiness and Pentecostal denominations, among others in various parts of the world, must be repudiated as denying the catholicity of the Body of Christ.

Catholicity, in our view, also demands a persistent critique of and challenge to the economic and political status quo; for those churches that benefit from the existing international order too easily assume its normative character and become self-appointed guardians of what is supposedly good for all. Thus, many North American conservatives and fundamentalists speak of American democracy as "Christian" and oppose Christian socialists as irregular at best and heretical at worst. Similarly, the "Moral Majority" in the U.S. supports "constructive engagement" with apartheid in South Africa as consistent with universal reason and the welfare of "all people of good will". In this view anti-communism becomes the test of universal Christian ethics and those who do not fall into line are considered sectarian, ignorant and contrary to the mainstream White American tradition which is regarded as the universal faith of the Church.

Jesus Christ challenged the assumption that faith in God or salvation was limited to the scribes and the Pharisees, or the rich and powerful. Instead he empowered sinners, the poor, strangers and women. His demonstration of catholicity was to open his arms to all who would be saved. His Church today can do no more or less.

#### IV. *Apostolicity*

We affirm the Apostolic tradition that recognizes the transmission of authentic faith down the centuries by all those who have faithfully lived in, whether or not they have been officially designated as apostles. We believe that, "What does not teach Christ is not Apostolic, even if it was taught by Peter or Paul; again what preaches Christ, this is Apostolic, even when preached by Judas, Annas, Pilate and Herod." We recognize, therefore, the apostolicity of what we have received from our slave ancestors who, though "unlearned and ignorant" men and women, reinterpreted the distorted Christianity they received from the slavemasters and

passed down to succeeding generations of Black believers the story of Jesus who was "the strong Deliverer," "the rose of Sharon, the bright and morning star," "the king who rides on a milk-white horse," "the dying lamb," "the Lord who's done just what he said," "the Balm in Gilead," and "the help of the poor and needy, in this lan' . . ." But we acknowledge the importance of the Apostolic tradition being engaged and not merely passed on. Apostolicity must be lived out in the context of contemporary events. It is not the recitation of past formulations, but the living of the present commandments of the Risen Lord.

In the final analysis the test of apostolicity is the experiencing of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in our daily struggle against demonic powers that seek to rob us of our inheritance as children of God redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. Our deeds, more than our creeds, determine whether we have fully received and acted upon the faith of the apostles.

Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31, 32). Afro-American Christians look to the words and acts of the Jesus of history for the Apostolic teaching as well as to the mystery of the Christ of faith. We take seriously the life, ministry and teaching of Jesus as the One who identified with the marginated of society and continues to identify with them. It is the Black Church's historic identification with marginality that Jesus is appropriated as the Black Messiah, the paradigm of our existential reality as an oppressed people and the affirmation of our survival and liberation.

Finally, for Black Christians, the search for an expression of the Apostolic faith must be multi-racial and multi-cultural rather than captive to any one race, sex, class or political ideology. The Church and the ecumenical movement must no longer submit to domination by social, economic or intellectual elites. The faith once delivered to the apostles by Jesus Christ is for the whole world and must be capable of being transmitted and responded to by all.

### *Conclusion and Recommendations*

1. The Afro-American Christian tradition, embodied particularly in Black Baptist, Methodist and Pentecostal Churches, but continuing also in other Black-led Protestant and Roman Catholic congregations, has been and continues to be an indigenous expression of the faith of the apostles in North America.
2. The Richmond Consultation affirms the World Council of Churches study "Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today" and is committed to work with the WCC and other ecumenical bodies toward the unity we seek.

3. We invite the other churches participating in the Faith and Order movement to give greater study and recognition to how God has maintained the continuity of the Apostolic Faith primarily through the oral character and noncreedal styles of the African American tradition expressed in worship, witness and social struggle.
4. We urge the other member churches of the National and World Council Commissions on Faith and Order to take note of the unity of faith and practice that the Black Church as historically emphasized and to engage the Faith and Order movement in greater involvement in the struggle against racism and all forms of oppression as an essential element of the Apostolic confession.
5. We call upon Black churches in North America, the Caribbean and in Africa to confess boldly the faith we received from the Apostles, despite every effort made to distort and falsify it, and joining with us who were a part of this historic consultation in Richmond, to intensify their involvement in the Faith and Order movement by sharing the "gift of Blackness"\* with those of other traditions.
6. Finally, we urge that this report be published and widely disseminated by the Commission on Faith and Order of the WCC as a study document and that Black Christians all over the world be encouraged to initiate interracial discussion groups for the consideration of its content and implications for the ecumenical movement; and that the result of such dissemination and discussion be reported back to the Commission on Faith and Order by cooperating national councils.

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\* Cf. Cornish Rogers, "The Gift of Blackness," in *Christian Century*, June 5-12, 1985 provides an account of the Black Churches Consultation held at Virginia Union University, Richmond, Virginia on December 14, 15, 1984.