

BACK TO THE BASICS: A NEW CHALLENGE FOR THE BLACK CHURCH

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Introduction

The development of the Black community in America witnessed the Black Church exercising the unique function of assisting Blacks to gain a measure of economic strength. The opinion is ventured by Fordham¹ that one of the most powerful and influential institutions to evolve within the Black community in the post-Civil War era was the Black Church. It was more than a religious institution: it was a social, political, and economic institution all in one. Its early mutual aid societies cared for the sick, aged, and disabled; buried the dead of indigent families; provided financial support for widows and orphans; made loans; and provided many related community services. In two of his earlier works, DuBois² held this same view that the Black Church was more than a religious institution. Defining the major functions of the church within the context of the Black community, he included the roles of setting moral standards, promoting education, working for social uplift of the race, building collective economic power, and providing opportunities for social interaction and recreation.

Across the generations, more than preaching has been on the agenda of the Black Church. Looking at its role during the Reconstruction Period, Fordham³ contends that the Black Church has been an institution that addressed itself primarily to the adaptive or utilitarian needs of its members and constituents.

In the early 1950s Brownlee⁴ wrote, "Blacks look upon their church to free the mind as well as to unfetter the soul in order to achieve industrial (economic) freedom." He further observed that, if the inner cities are to be saved, rather than to be deserted, much depends upon the thrust of the stability of the Black Church, in both its vision and its economic outreach into the community.

Two incidents in the development of Black communities 126 years apart validate the statement that the functions of the Black Church go far beyond that of being simply religious. In the first instance, which is related by Fordham,⁵ the Black community was expelled from

Cincinnati in 1829. Thereupon, the Black Church undertook a campaign led by the Reverend Peter Williams, rector of St. Phillips African Church in New York City, to bring economic aid to the expelled community. In a sermon in 1830 he urged the establishment of a settlement in northern Canada for these refugees from Wilberforce, stating that it would be wise and proper for free Blacks and the church to pool their resources to reserve a million acre tract being offered them in Canada. The St. Phillips congregation raised \$6,000 for the initial price on 4,000 acres of this tract. In addition to the money for the land, the church donated clothing and other necessities for the exiles from Cincinnati who had emigrated to Canada.

The other incident occurred in 1955 in Somerville, Tennessee, when a group of approximately fifty Black tenant farmers registered to vote. They were expelled from the land they had farmed, and were forced, in the dead of winter, to pitch tents in a muddy field they were allowed to use to house their families. Their plight was headlined as sensational news, but only the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., through its churches, led by Dr. J. H. Jackson, its president, responded with the necessary economic aid to get the people into sanitary, warm shelters overnight. Moreover, the churches of the Convention rallied to Dr. Jackson's call for economic assistance and raised sufficient funds to build, within six months, fifty fully equipped houses for these farmers and their families. These houses were sold to the farmers on long-term leases at no interest whatever. The Convention also bought more than 500 acres of land for them to farm on a commercial basis. Within three years, more than one hundred houses had been built by the Convention for these families, and, in a span of five years, all debts were paid, and the farmers owned the properties outright.

The Issues Explored

It is this writer's contention that the Black Church in the 1980's should be classified as "the invisible institution that is in need of a second Reconstruction." It is this writer's opinion that the Black Church should begin the next decade with a strong return to the basic concerns and/or issues that are related to the survival and elevation of the Black masses.

After the Civil War and the Emancipation, ministers became concerned that there was no one to baptize Black children, to perform marriages, or to bury the dead. A ministry had to be created at once -- created out of the material at hand.⁶ The material at hand was, of course, those Black slaves who had been "called to preach." In answer to the criticism that neither men nor money were available for creating a ministry, the minister quoted above wrote that God could call the men, and the A.M.E. Church had the authority to commission them when thus called! This represented the fusion of the "invisible institution" of the Black Church which had taken root among the slaves and the institutional church which had grown up among the Blacks who were free before the Civil War.⁷

The Black Church must, in the form of a prime national directive, return to the ideas which suggest involvement in such areas as mutual aid societies, credit unions, education, and corporate investments. These are the specific areas that this writer feels are basic necessities if the Black Church expects to become a viable institution in the twenty-first century.

It is important to acknowledge some of the immediate barriers facing the Black Church. In this regard, this writer agrees with Johnstone's assessment:⁸ First, organizations of Black ministers, whether denominational or nondenominational, are not entering the political arena to any substantial degree. They are not entering the political arena as independent organizations, but only as part of a broad community effort, and even then not all of them by any means.

Second, Black preachers tend to remain noticeably independent entrepreneurs. Most activities directed toward affecting the political and governmental structure of the community are carried on by individual ministers acting out of personal motivation, as representatives of their local congregations or as citizen members of various local community organizations.

A third factor that tends to minimize the impact of Black preachers beyond the walls of their churches stems from the nature and demands of their occupational role. Whether by default or design, many Black preachers must assume tasks that in many white churches are handled by laymen - such functions as handling congregational business affairs and building maintenance.

A fourth broad factor that tends to limit the potential of the Black Church centers in the diversity and lack of consensus among Black ministers. The differences along the militant-traditionalist continuum are both many and of considerable magnitude.

The Black Church must begin to address itself to the serious problems of modernizing its philosophy to meet the needs of a people who are mentally and physically enslaved in "human zoos" which are commonly referred to as inner cities, ghettos, and urban jungles. The Black Church has many opportunities to be creative and innovative in its attempt to practice a truly humanistic ministry.

Whenever a traditional institution attempts to bring about social and/or political change, there will always be certain dangers. The most salient dangers are fear of the unknown and refusal to participate. However, great dangers always accompany great opportunities. The possibility of destruction is always implicit in the act of creation. Based on this perspective, this paper concludes with some suggestions for creative change.

All "storefront churches" should be banned from Black communities. Most of these buildings should be condemned, because, in this writer's opinion and eyesight, most of these structures are moral, ethical and physical eye sores. Those Black preachers who call themselves ministers, but who are actually pimps who use and abuse uneducated Blacks (and some mis-educated Blacks) for their own personal gain, should be banned from practicing their trade in the Black ghettos. The increased financial resources (monies that would normally be spent in the storefronts) would be pooled into larger religious establishments. This writer is not implying that there are no religious pimps in the larger and more traditional Black religious establishments. Rather, the writer is suggesting that the phasing out of storefronts would be a wise and necessary investment.

Secondly, Black congregations should insist that their ministers be educated not only in theological areas, but in other areas such as business and economics as well. In addition to the Ten Commandments, preachers must preach that the Western world is competitive, aggressive, capitalistic, and that nothing is sacrosanct. The only thing that is respected in the West is organized power -- the ability to back up one's position with dollars, people, and force if necessary. In a sense, this writer believes that this was the message that Martin Luther King, Jr. was finally getting across to the masses of poor people just prior to his assassination!

Thirdly, the Black Church must assume a more active role in providing supplemental educational opportunities for Black people. For example, such classes as "Sexism and Racism," "Essence of Ethnicity," "The Black Family," and "Black Thought" should be in the educational program of all Black churches, including their Sunday School programs. This basic approach would revolutionize the Black Church by making it address itself to the serious problems of modernizing its philosophy to meet the needs of a people enslaved in urban jungles in an industrial society where the individual must be taught to manipulate his environment.

The Black Church is the only institution in existence that is capable of reversing a trend of thinking that has brought Black people to the very brinks of annihilation. First, the Black preachers are the historical leaders of most Black people and their words in the churches will be heard by more people than belong to any other organization. Second, most Black people, whether they go to church or not, or whether they have ever been there, are victims of beliefs which have their origin in the Black Church. Third, a change of religion will not eliminate the crises most Black people face because most Black people are going to die Christians.

The churches must sponsor an alternative educational system similar to that of the Catholic church -- the reason being that since Black people are not presently organized to make the existing educational system (the public one) work for us, we must begin to prepare a system which will end the destruction of whole generations

of Black minds. This means that Black preachers must be trained in areas which allow for a humanistic approach toward technology: ethnic studies courses, mathematics, biology, chemistry, economics, electronics, engineering, physics, and English. Religious ethics may still be taught, but Black children must also be taught that they can control their environment, their living space, and that they can discover nature's laws which govern life. (They must discover the laws, not change them.)

NOTES

¹Monroe Fordham. *Major Themes in Northern Black Religious Thought, 1800 - 1860* (Hicksville, New York: Exposition Press, 1921).

²W. E. B. DuBois. *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McChurgá and Co., 1903), chapter X. pp. 189-206.

³Fordham. *op. cit.*

⁴Fred L. Brownlee. *These Rights We Hold* (New York: Friendship Press, 1952).

⁵Fordham. *op. cit.*

⁶E. Franklin Frazier. *The Negro Church In America* (New York: Scholcken Books, 1963) p. 29.

⁷Frazier. *op. cit.*, 29.

⁸Ronald L. Johnstone. "Negro Preachers Take Sides" in *The Black Church In America*. ed. Hart M. Nelson, Raytha Yokley, and Anne K. Nelsen (New York: Basic Books, 1971) pp. 284-285.

Critique by Charles C. Irby

Back to the Basics... is a provocative presentation which focuses on the role of the Black church as a socio-cultural, politico-economic institution in an historic context. Not focused in Williams' paper are the spiritual, religious aspects of the Black church, but the solutions proposed certainly lead toward a liberation theology. Williams' primary focus is on how the Black church, in a modern context, has drifted away from its original *raison d'etre*, and he attempts to show what can be done to restore the Black church, as an agent or institution for the people, to a position which serves the people.