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Address to the National Press Club



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Over the next few days, prominent scholars of the African-American religious tradition from several different disciplines -- theologians, church historians, ethicists, professors of Hebrew Bible, homiletics, hermeneutics and historians of religions -- those scholars will join in with sociologists, political analysts, local church pastors and denominational officials to examine the African-American religious experience and its historical, theological, and political context. The workshops, the panel discussions, and the symposia will go into much more intricate detail about this unknown phenomenon of the black church than I have time to go into in the few moments that we have to share together.

And I would invite you to spend the next two days getting to know just a little bit about a religious tradition that is as old as and, in some instances, older than this country. And this is a country which houses its religious tradition that we all love and a country that some of us have served. It is a tradition that is in some ways like Ralph Ellison's "The Invisible Man". It has been right here in our midst and on our shores since the 1600s, but it was, has been and, in far too many instances, still is invisible to the dominant culture in terms of its rich history, its incredible legacy, and its multiple meanings.

The black religious experience is a tradition that at one point in American history was actually called "the invisible institution," as it was forced underground by the Black Codes. The Black Codes prohibited the gathering of more than two black people without a white person being present to monitor the conversation, the content, and the mood of any discourse between persons of African descent in this country.

Africans did not stop worshipping because of the Black Codes. Africans did not stop gathering for inspiration and information and for encouragement and for hope in the midst of discouraging and seemingly hopeless circumstances.



They just gathered out of the eyesight and the earshot of those who defined them as less than human. They became, in other words, invisible in and invisible to the eyes of the dominant culture. They gathered to worship in brush arbors -- sometimes called "hush arbors" -- where the slaveholders, slave patrols, and Uncle Toms couldn't hear nobody pray.

From the 1700s in North America, with the founding of the first legally recognized independent black congregations, through the end of the Civil War and the passing of the 13th and 14th Amendments to the Constitution of the United States of America, the black religious experience was informed by, enriched by, expanded by, challenged by, shaped by, and influenced by the influx of Africans from the other two Americas and the Africans brought into this country from the Caribbean; plus the Africans who were called "fresh blacks" by the slave traders, those Africans who had not been through the seasoning process of the Middle Passage in the Caribbean colonies, those Africans on the sea coast islands off of Georgia and South Carolina, the Gullah -- [changing pronunciation] -- we say in English Gullah; those of us in the black community say Geechee -- those people brought into the black religious experience, a flavor that other seasoned Africans could not bring.

It is those various streams of the black religious experience which will be addressed in summary form over the next two days, streams which require full courses at the university and graduate- school level and cannot be fully addressed in a two-day symposium, and streams which tragically remain invisible in a dominant culture which knows nothing about those whom Langston Hughes calls the darker brother and sister.

It is all of those streams that make up this multi-layered and rich tapestry of the black religious experience, and I stand before you to open up this two-day symposium with the hope that this most recent attack on the black church -- this is not an attack on Jeremiah Wright; it is an attack on the black church.

(As the vice president told you, that applause comes from not the working press.)

The most recent attack on the black church, it is our hope that this just might mean that the reality of the African-American church will no longer be invisible. Maybe now, as an honest dialogue about race in this country begins, a dialogue called for by Senator Obama and a dialogue to begin in the United Church of Christ among 5,700 congregations in just a few weeks -- maybe now, as that dialogue begins, the religious tradition that has kept hope alive for people struggling to survive in countless hopeless situations, maybe that religious tradition will be understood, celebrated, and even embraced by a nation that seems not to have noticed why 11:00 on Sunday morning has been called "the most segregated hour in America."¹ We have known since 1787 that it is the most segregated hour. Maybe now we can begin to understand why it is the most segregated hour. And maybe now we can begin to take steps to move the black religious tradition from the status of invisible to the status of invaluable, not just for some black people in this country, but for all the people in this country.

Maybe this dialogue on race -- an honest dialogue that does not engage in denial or superficial platitudes -- maybe this dialogue on race can move the people of faith in this country from various stages of alienation and marginalization to the exciting possibility of reconciliation.



That is my hope as I open up this two-day symposium, and I open it as a pastor and a professor who comes from a long tradition of what I call "the prophetic theology of the black church."

Now, in the 1960s, the term "liberation theology" began to gain currency with the writings and the teachings of preachers, pastors, priests, and professors from Latin America. Their theology was done from the underside. Their viewpoint was not from the top down or from a set of teachings which undergirded imperialism. Their viewpoints, rather, were from the bottom up, the thoughts and understandings of God, the faith, religion, and the Bible from those whose lives were ground under, mangled, and destroyed by the ruling classes or the oppressors. Liberation theology started in and started from a different place. It started from the vantage point of the oppressed.

In the late 1960s, when Dr. James Cone's powerful books burst onto the scene, the term "black liberation theology" began to be used. I do not in any way disagree with Dr. Cone, nor do I in any way diminish the inimitable and incomparable contribution that he has made and that he continues to make to the field of theology. Jim, incidentally, is a personal friend of mine.

I call our faith tradition, however, "the prophetic tradition of the black church," because I take its origins back past Jim Cone, past the sermons and songs of Africans in bondage in the transatlantic slave trade. I take it back past the problem of western ideology and notions of white supremacy. I take and trace the theology of the black church back to the prophets in the Hebrew bible and to its last prophet, in my tradition, the one we call Jesus of Nazareth.

The prophetic tradition of the black church has its roots in Isaiah, the 61st chapter, where God says the prophet is to preach the gospel to the poor and to set at liberty those who are held captive. Liberating the captives also liberates those who are holding them captive. It frees the captives and it frees the captors. It frees the oppressed and it frees the oppressors. The prophetic theology of the black church during the days of chattel slavery was a theology of liberation. It was preached to set free those who were held in bondage, spiritually, psychologically, and sometimes physically, and it was practiced to set the slaveholders free from the notion that they could define other human beings or confine a soul set free by the power of the gospel.

The prophetic theology of the black church during the days of segregation, Jim Crow, lynching, and the "separate but equal" fantasy was a theology of liberation. It was preached to set African-Americans free from the notion of second-class citizenship, which was the law of the land. And it was practiced to set free misguided and miseducated Americans from the notion that they were actually superior to other Americans based on the color of their skin.

The prophetic theology of the black church in our day is preached to set African-Americans and all other Americans free from the misconceived notion that different means deficient. Being different does not mean one is deficient. It simply means one is different, like snowflakes, like the diversity that God loves.



Black music is different from European and European music. It is not deficient. It is just different. Black worship is different from European and European-American worship. It is not deficient. It is just different. Black preaching is different from European and European-American preaching. It is not deficient. It is just different. It is not bombastic. It is not controversial. It's different.

(Those of you who can't see on C-SPAN, we had one or two working press clap along with the non-working press.)

Black learning styles are different from European and European-American learning styles. They are not deficient. They are just different. This principle of "difference does not mean deficient" is at the heart of the prophetic theology of the black church. It is a theology of liberation.

The prophetic theology of the black church is not only a theology of liberation; it is also a theology of transformation, which is also rooted in Isaiah 61, the text from which Jesus preached in his inaugural message as recorded by Luke. When you read the entire passage from either Isaiah 61 or Luke 4, and do not try to understand the passage or the content of the passage in the context of a sound bite, what you see is God's desire for a radical change in a social order that has gone sour.

God's desire is for positive, meaningful, and permanent change. God does not want one people seeing themselves as superior to other people. God does not want the powerless masses -- the poor, the widows, the marginalized, and those underserved by the powerful few -- to stay locked into sick systems which treat some in the society as being more equal than others in that same society. God's desire is for positive change, transformation; real change, not cosmetic change, transformation; radical change or a change that makes a permanent difference, transformation. God's desire is for transformation: changed lives, changed minds, changed laws, changed social orders, and changed hearts in a changed world. This principle of transformation is at the heart of the prophetic theology of the black church.

These two foci of liberation and transformation have been at the very core of the black religious experience from the days of David Walker, Harriet Tubman, Richard Allen, Jarena Lee, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, and Sojourner Truth through the days of Adam Clayton Powell, Ida B. Wells, Dr. Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, Barbara Jordan, Cornel West, and Fannie Lou Hamer.

These two foci of liberation and transformation have been at the very core of the United Church of Christ since its predecessor denomination, the Congregational Church of New England came to the moral defense and paid for the legal defense of the Mende people aboard the slave ship *Amistad*, since the days when the United Church of Christ fought against slavery, played an active role in the Underground Railroad, and set up over 500 schools for the Africans who were freed from slavery in 1865. And these two foci remain at the core of the teachings of the United Church of Christ as it has fought against apartheid in South Africa and racism in the United States of America ever since the union which formed the United Church of Christ in 1957.



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These two foci of liberation and transformation have also been at the very core and the congregation of Trinity United Church of Christ since it was founded in 1961, and these foci have been the bedrock of our preaching and practice for the past 36 years.

Our congregation, as you heard in the introduction, took a stand against apartheid when the government of our country was supporting the racist regime of the Afrikaner government in South Africa. Our congregation stood in solidarity with the peasants in El Salvador and Nicaragua while our government, through Ollie North and the Iran-Contra scandal was supporting the contras who were killing the peasants and the Miskito Indians in those two countries.

Our congregation sent 35 men and women through accredited seminaries to earn their Master of Divinity degrees with an additional 40 currently being enrolled in seminary while building two senior citizen housing complexes and running two child-care programs for the poor, the unemployed, the low-income parents on the south side of Chicago for the past 30 years. Our congregation feeds over 5,000 homeless and needy families every year while our government cuts food stamps and spends billions fighting in an unjust war in Iraq.

Our congregation has sent dozens of boys and girls to fight in the Vietnam War, the first Gulf War, and the present two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. My goddaughter's unit just arrived in Iraq this week, while those who call me unpatriotic have used their positions of privilege to avoid military service while sending over 4,000 American boys and girls of every race to die over a lie.

Our congregation has had an HIV/AIDS ministry for over two decades. Our congregation has awarded over one million dollars to graduating high school seniors going into college, and an additional one-half million dollars to the United Negro College Fund and the six HBCUs related to the United Church of Christ while advocating for health care for the uninsured, workers' rights for those forbidden to form unions, and fighting the unjust sentencing system which has sent black men and women to prison for longer terms for possession of crack cocaine than white men and women have to serve for the possession of powder cocaine.

Our congregation has had a prison ministry for 30 years, a drug and alcohol recovery ministry for 20 years, a full-service program for senior citizens, and 22 different ministries for the youth of our church, from preschool through high school, all proceeding from the starting point of liberation and transformation, a prophetic theology which presumes God's desire for changed minds, changed laws, changed social orders, changed lives, changed hearts in a changed world.

The prophetic theology of the black church is a theology of liberation. It is a theology of transformation. And it is ultimately a theology of reconciliation. The Apostle Paul said, be ye reconciled one to another, even as God was in Christ reconciling the world to God's self.²

God does not desire for us, as children of God, to be at war with each other, to see each other as superior or inferior, to hate each other, abuse each other, misuse each other, define each other or put each other down.



God wants us reconciled one to another, and that third principle in the prophetic theology of the black church is also and has always been at the heart of the black church experience in North America. When Richard Allen and Absalom Jones were dragged out of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia during the same year, 1787, when the Constitution was framed in Philadelphia, for daring to kneel at their altar next to white worshipers, they founded the Free African Society, and they welcomed white members into their congregation to show that reconciliation was the goal, not retaliation.

Absalom Jones became the rector of the St. Thomas Anglican Church in 1791, and St. Thomas welcomed white Anglicans in the spirit of reconciliation. Richard Allen became the founding pastor of the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. And the motto of the AME Church has always been "God our Father, man our brother, and Christ our Redeemer" -- the word "man" included men and women of all races back in 1787 and 1792 -- in the spirit of reconciliation.

The black church's role in the fight for equality and justice from the 1700s up until 2008 has always had as its core the non-negotiable doctrine of reconciliation, children of God repenting for past sins against each other. Jim Wallis says America's racist -- sin of racism has never even been confessed, much less repented for. Repenting for past sins against each other and being reconciled to one another -- Jim Wallis is white, by the way -- being reconciled to one another because of the love of God, who made all of us in God's image.

Reconciliation, the years have taught me, is where the hardest work is found for those of us in the Christian faith, however, because it means some critical thinking and some reexamination of faulty assumptions. When using the paradigm of Dr. William Augustus Jones, Dr. Jones, in his book *God in the Ghetto*, argues quite accurately that one's theology, how I see God, determines one's anthropology, how I see humans, and one's anthropology then determines one's sociology, how I order my society.

Now the implications from the outset are obvious. If I see God as male, if I see God as white male, if I see God as superior, as God over us and not Immanuel, which means "God with us", if I see God as mean, vengeful, authoritarian, sexist, or misogynist, then I see humans through that lens. My theological lens shapes my anthropological lens. And as a result, white males are superior; all others are inferior. And I order my society where I can worship God on Sunday morning, wearing a black clergy robe, and kill others on Sunday evening, wearing a white Klan robe. I can have laws which favor whites over blacks, in America or South Africa. I can construct a theology of apartheid, in the Afrikaner church, and a theology of white supremacy in the North American or Germanic church. The implications from the outset are obvious.

But then the complicated work is left to be done, as you dig deeper into the constructs which tradition, habits, and hermeneutics put on your plate. To say, "I am a Christian," is not enough. Why? Because the Christianity of the slaveholder is not the Christianity of the slave. The God to whom the slaveholders pray, as they ride on the decks of the slave ship, is not the God to whom the enslaved are praying, as they ride beneath the decks on that same slave ship.



How we are seeing God, our theology, is not the same. And what we both mean when we say, "I am a Christian," is not the same thing. The prophetic theology of the black church has always seen and still sees all of God's children as sisters and brothers, equals who need reconciliation, who need to be reconciled as equals in order for us to walk together into the future which God has prepared for us.

Reconciliation does not mean that blacks become whites or whites become blacks; that Hispanics become Asian, or that Asians become Europeans. Reconciliation means we embrace our individual rich histories -- all of them. We retain who we are as persons of different cultures, while acknowledging that those of other cultures are not superior or inferior to us; they are just different from us.

We root out any teaching of superiority, inferiority, hatred, or prejudice. And we recognize for the first time in modern history, in the West, that the Other who stands before us with a different color of skin, a different texture of hair, different music, different preaching styles, and different dance moves -- that Other is one of God's children just as we are; no better, no worse, prone to error and in need of forgiveness just as we are. Only then will liberation, transformation, and reconciliation become realities and cease being ever-elusive ideals.

Thank you for having me in your midst this morning.

¹ Martin Luther King, "It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning, the same hour when many are standing to sing: 'In Christ There Is No East Nor West.'" (Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story, 1958).

² An extrapolation perhaps, taken from two different NT passages attributed to the Apostle Paul. II Corinthians 5:18-20 states, "And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God." And Ephesians 2:14 states, "Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby...." (KJV, emphasis added for clarity)