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Why the “Black Church” Doesn’t Exist—and Never Has

By Lawrence Ware

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What is colloquially called ‘The Black Church’ is actually many communities of faith that share a cultural heritage and has historically been populated by people of African descent. There is neither formal connection nor intentional structure to these tangentially connected, mostly protestant churches.

What all of these churches *do* have in common is that their very existence speaks to the ability of black people to persevere despite a white supremacist culture—but let’s not sanitize history.

Historians put the percentage of churches that actively supported Martin Luther King, Jr. at around 15%. Many clergy were critical of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. There were concerns that King was moving too quickly, and that he was only interested in publicity. There were also conservative parishioners in certain churches who did not want their middle-class existence (and lives) endangered by the actions of “radical” clergy. When King started to focus on the North by asking hard questions about economic inequality and the war in Vietnam, divisions in the black community only deepened.

Let me be clear. There has never been a unified, holistic position taken by ALL black churches on the issue of civil rights. Yet, while there were always secular elements in civil rights movements, it has rarely been almost exclusively secular. The philosophical rationale for these movements was expressed with religious language, and the black church played a pivotal role as a place to meet and organize. Why, now, when a new civil rights movement is gaining momentum as a result of highly publicized police murders of unarmed black men and women, is there relative quiet from some black churches? Why are these churches reactive in the face of social injustice instead of proactive? Why does it appear that black pastors are hesitant to support the #BlackLivesMatter movement? I think there are three reasons.

1: The Prosperity Gospel

Part of what's so insidious about capitalism is its malleability. In prosperity theology, the notion of communal liberation from social oppression has been combined with capitalistic notions of individualized wealth creation. As a result, liberation now means access to wealth and social status.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Kenneth Copeland, Frederick Price, and Kenneth Hagin used the burgeoning platform of televangelism to popularize a problematic conception of the gospel. Contemporarily, preachers like T.D. Jakes, Joel Osteen, and Creflo Dollar articulate a version of the prosperity gospel grounded in a postmodern, self-help hermeneutic to millions of people.

When oppressed people are told that God wants them to be “blessed and highly favored” or that they need to “take back what the devil stole from them,” they are being fed the idea that capitalistic gains are the goal of religious life. Grace is measured by the size of one's bank account, and faith is determined by one's ability to attain creature comforts. Creflo Dollar has gone so far as to say that the only way one can have influence in America is through signs of wealth, and that is part of the reason why he needed a new multimillion-dollar jet. (God would clearly be displeased if a preacher flew coach.)

Thousands of black preachers saw the success of this type of preaching, and were influenced by its message. As a result, many black churches are so tied to an understanding of blessedness and liberation grounded in personal success that they have difficulty galvanizing collective social action. On any given Sunday, a version of the prosperity gospel is preached from hundreds of black pulpits. This mishandling of the gospel keeps many black Christians from thinking productively about communal social liberation.

2: Adoption of Church Growth Models

Adopting the church growth model of ecclesiastical operation undermines progressive social action as well. The church growth model, popularized by conservative religious think tanks like The Barna Group and The Francis A. Schaeffer Institute, emphasizes making the worship experience palatable and entertaining. This model prioritizes growing a church numerically and financially, not organizing for social action or political advocacy. The goal is to create as large a church as possible. There is a focus on providing “cradle to the grave” services for your membership, treating the church like a business enterprise. You rarely look outside the walls of the church. The few times you engage your community, you do so for either evangelical efforts (that is, to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ) or to engage in brief moments of charitable outreach. Whereas the church was a place for people to be pushed to confront the harsh realities of race and racism in America, it is now a place where you go to hear an encouraging sermon that will help you achieve your personal (often economic or romantic) goals.

This approach leads to pastors that are concerned about pushing their people too far. If there is too much talk about topics that are unpleasant, they risk losing members (and their economic base). This leads to black pastors who preach entertaining sermons lacking in prophetic critique and sociological depth. We emphasize how to achieve God’s blessings and overcome personal difficulty, but fail to confront systemic injustices. This leaves black Christians ill equipped to respond to assaults upon black dignity from a white supremacist culture.

3: Patriarchy

Today’s activists are intersectional. They seek links in systems of oppression. As a result, many are unwilling to work with institutions, like some black churches, that they see as morally compromised.

Many black pastors decry racism and economic injustice while supporting ecclesiastical policies grounded in patriarchy. They think the Bible supports their position. Indeed, Paul uses masculine language in 1st Timothy 3: 1 and 2 when he says “if a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work” and “a bishop then must be...the husband of one wife” (NKJV). These passages appear to endorse marginalizing women in the church. That is a misreading of the text. Paul is expressing his personal preference in this pericope, a preference shaped by a viciously patriarchal culture. Further, many scholars argue that Paul was addressing an issue specific to the congregation that received the letter. In any case, we misread the text if we infer that all women are precluded from working in ministry.

In the 1980s, after being taken to task by womanist theologians, James Cone admitted he made a mistake by placing an emphasis on men in *A Black Theology of Liberation*. In the 20th Anniversary edition, he courageously includes essays from Delores Williams and Rosemary Radford Reuther that critique his silence about misogyny in the church. Like Cone, many black clergy need to confront their patriarchy.

In *The Ebony Exodus Project: Why Some Black Women are Stepping Out on Religion—and Others Should Too*, Candace L. M. Gorham notes that women are the lifeblood of black ecclesiastical communities, but men hold most positions of power. She points out that there are still many pulpits that women cannot enter. She is right. If black churches want to be morally consistent, they must be intersectional. One cannot demand justice in one arena and perpetuate injustice in another.

I love black churches. I love their history. I love their traditions...but I love black people more. One should not love an institution more than he loves the people said institution is supposed to serve.

James Baldwin said, “I love America more than any other country in the world and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.” The same can be said of black churches. If we love them—if we love black people—we must be critical that they may be revolutionary once again.