

The Nature of the Evangelistic Task of Predominantly White Denominations in Relation to The Black Community

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BY THE SUMMER of 1966 it was clear that the white churches and white churchmen could not be depended upon to understand and interpret the black power discussion that had taken place on the march between Memphis and Jackson, nor were they willing or able to correct the distortions of what had happened as perceptions and explanations became confused both outside of, and within the movement itself. That task, as far as the churches were concerned, had to be performed by Negro churchmen who were close enough to the national scene to have gained a panoramic perspective, who had been deeply enough involved with Dr. King and the civil rights movement to have won their right to speak boldly, and who were black enough to challenge, without deep feelings of guilt and betrayal, the white brethren who were beginning to show signs of attempting a reconciliation with the great mass of white liberal opinion and backlash against black power.

But something else was even more obvious by the summer of 1966 and again it was what was occurring outside of rather than within the churches which made the situation clear.

The famous slogan which the Federal Council of Churches had adopted in the late 1930's—"A non-segregated church in a non-segregated society"—had become totally bankrupt as an expression of the highest priority for church action in the race field. It was no longer acceptable as a description of the social context or the realities of contemporary life with which we were dealing as "secular men who had heard the Gospel" in our own time and place.

The banner of a non-segregated church in a non-segregated society begged too many burning questions to be unfurled as a brave

pronouncement of where we were and where we thought we were going. Was it not of the very nature of the church in the United States that it is and always has been segregated by race and class? Was there any indication that the majority of either white or black Christians wanted it differently? Given the characteristics of conventional Christianity in the United States, is whether or not the churches are interracial a relevant question? Was there any reasonable expectation that the churches could be desegregated before widespread desegregation occurred in housing, public schools and in the informal and associational structures of American society? Finally, should black Christians permit themselves to be integrated within overwhelmingly white church structures without the freedom to develop and maintain their own leadership eschelons and without determinative power concerning those aspects of church life in which their lives are most directly affected?

These and many other questions were simply by-passed in the play acting and lip service that for 31 years were given to the concept of a non-segregated church in a non-segregated society. It took the Meredith march and the emergence of the black power motif within the churches themselves to unmask the irrelevancy and hypocrisy of the white liberal pronouncements and sloganizing about racial integration within what is undoubtedly the most conservative of all American institutions.

Sobered by the failure of the old civil rights movement in the North—a failure for which the white church must bear major responsibility—and made wiser by the interracial confrontations which have occurred over the last several months within ecumenical circles, as well as within the denominations, we approach today the problem of reconciling black and white within the one church of Christ from a somewhat different direction. Those black churchmen who are members of the predominantly white denominations know very well that the real question is not whether or not these churches can become truly integrated on Sunday morning, but whether, in the next 25 to 50 years, these churches will have any meaningful contact with black people at all! If that question can be answered in the affirmative we must move on quickly to inquire what the nature of that contact must be in order to contribute to the dignity and humanity of both black and white people in a time of revolutionary change.

That is why any discussion of the mission of the church in the United States today must ask totally new questions in a totally different context than the one in which we searched for solutions to the faithlessness and brokenness of the church in the period between the Supreme Court decision of 1954 and the death of Martin Luther King. It is not merely segregation or integration which are at stake today. It is rather the question of the viability of the Christian Church in the United States—and perhaps in Western civilization. It is the question of whether or not this church can any longer encompass within it the masses of non-white

persons, who make up the majority of the peoples of the earth, without undergoing radical changes in its understanding of its purpose in the world *vis-a-vis* robbed, subjugated and excluded peoples, without dismantling its organizational structures for mission and without bringing to an end its basic conformity to European theological traditions and Anglo-Saxon styles of life and structures of value. That is to say, as far as the American church is concerned, there can be no question of coming through this period of crisis as a viable and relevant institution without a radical change in its spiritual and physical relationship to black Christians—most of whom are in all black churches—and to the black community as a whole.

II.

At the heart of racism within the American churches is the disjunction in the hearts and minds of white Christians between Christian brotherhood and racial equality. From the earliest missionary advances to convert the slave to Christianity the basic assumption was that while his soul belong to Jesus, his body was the property of his master and nothing should be construed from his conversion that would proscribe the fundamental caste relationship into which he had been forcibly introduced upon his arrival to colonial America. With the Society of Friends being the one exception, and that not until 1688, the official opinion of the American churches for more than a century was that there was no inconsistency in calling a black man a Christian brother, in teaching him how to read the Bible and worshipping with him (often in the same local church) and at the same time holding him in bondage, or at least acquiescing to chattel slavery as a legitimate American institution.

Religion in colonial America could perceive the sovereignty of God and the unalienable rights of man as contrary to the economic exploitation of the colonies by King George. It could even thunder the judgment of God upon England from the pulpit calling upon Christians to take up arms against her. But it could not see any religious reason for the abolition of slavery even after the slave had been converted to Christianity and had become a communicant member of the church.

Looking upon the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries we are amazed by the ease with which American Christians for so long used the institution of religion to protect a double standard of human justice which suited their economic self-interest. No amount of scholarly research and eloquence by white church historians about the "deep sympathy and solicitude" the Christian slaveholder had for his slaves, or about the zeal with which the major denominations threw themselves into the task of evangelizing the slave population after the Revolution, can make us forget that the churches themselves excluded the black man from the very freedoms which they justified for white men on the basis of Christian faith.

Therein lies the core of moral corruption in the American churches today and the kernel of American racism. It was possible by a curious perversion of Christian ethics, to share with black people a common residence in the New World, a common cup in the church and a common brotherhood under the Fatherhood of God, but somehow to regard them as something less than Americans and with "no rights that white men are bound to respect." When northern white Christians, with their purses less bulging from the economic benefits of slavery than those of their brothers in the South and with their consciences burning under the lash of the abolitionists, finally concluded that slavery was a sin, most of the major churches split North and South and the stage was set for one of the bloodiest civil wars in history.

But the original attitude of the churches found it expedient to separate love and justice where black people were concerned and that attitude prevailed in the end. What Lincoln might have said was that the war was a test to determine whether this nation or any nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, could extend those same ideals to black men as well as to white men and still endure. That test has not yet been determinatively made, for what was guaranteed to the freedman in the amendments to the Constitution and the early civil rights laws, have never been satisfactorily delivered and the nation still endures half slave and half free. The war removed the legal fetters which bound black Americans, but it did not remove from society the disjunction between citizenship for Negroes and their free access to all good things America had to give to the off-scouring of Europe, nor did it remove from the white churches the disjunction between brotherhood and equality in the household of faith.

The result has been that church integration, like integration in society, has always been a one-way street with the assumption that everything black was subordinate and inferior and would have to be given up for everything white. The white church, in its accommodation to white middle class society, attempted to make over the black man and his church in its own image and to force the black community into the mold of the white society to which the white church had always been in bondage and which it conceive to be the nearest thing on earth to the kingdom of God in heaven.

Was this development the inevitable expression of what has been the historic relationship of the church to its cultural milieu? Even if Christianity is always transmitted from one group to another in a cultural context the fact remains that the exclusion of black Christians from authentic experience of that context, in terms of freedom and economic justice, subverted the missionary enterprise in the United States in the same way it is subverted today by complicity of the church in American imperialistic ambitions in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

III.

The black churches which split off from the white Methodist and Baptist denominations in the latter part of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century borrowed heavily from the white churches which had first evangelized them and ordained their clergy. These black churches were able, however, to develop their own styles of life and their own institutions. Joseph Washington in his book *Black Religion* is sharply critical of these churches which grew out of what he calls Negro folk religion, shorn of the rich theological and ecclesiastical traditions of the main line Reformation churches.

But it is precisely in these black churches, which were either forced out or broke away, that an authentic black culture and religion were germinated. Whatever may be said of the deficiencies or excesses of their preaching and brand of churchmanship they were the preeminent expression of the yearning for freedom and dignity by a people who had been introduced to a religion, but excluded from all but the most demeaning aspects of the cultural mold of that religion.

On the other hand, the black churches which remained a part of the main line white denominations, but were also excluded from participation in the main line culture, were obliged to substitute whatever they had of their own for a system of white cultural and religious values—a system which in the black church and community could only be a poor facsimile of the real thing, a second class culture for second class Christians.

Despite the fact that the white denominations have made a lasting contribution to these churches and to their communities by establishing hundreds of churches, schools and colleges throughout the nation (and especially in the South), it must nevertheless be conceded by those who are products of this missionary activity that as long as these institutions remain under white control—either locally or from denominational headquarters—they make little effort to interpenetrate the white cultural accretion with a distinctive black ingredient which could be recognized as a viable component of the American ethos.

This is because they are created and sustained as appendages of a middle class white church and society. At best they were the objects of a benevolent paternalism and either atrophied or were smothered to death in the avid embrace of the great White Father and the Great White Mother. At worst they were hostages thrown over the walls of the white churches to keep at bay the wolves of a guilty conscience and a national embarrassment. In such a situation it was inevitable that a kind of cynicism would develop on both sides and that one day these whitenized black Christians would say, "There ain't nothing Charley can do for me but lay his money on the line and move on. That's the name of the game we've been playing with one another and if he's satisfied with it, so am I!"

The problem of the whitenized black churches today is how to recover their own self-respect by demythologizing the white cultural bag through which the faith was transmitted to them and in which they have curled themselves up so comfortably. In so doing they may discover that the essence of the Christian faith not only transcends ultimately the ethnocentric culture of the white man, but that of the black man as well; that this Christ, in whom there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female, is also neither black nor white.

Indeed, in liberating itself from the mythology of white Christianity and standing over against the suburban captivity of the white church, the whitenized black churches may be able to illuminate a theme from the left wing of the Protestant Reformation which the American experience has increasingly made opaque. Namely, that while the church is not permitted to create its own culture alongside of the secular, it does stand in a dialectical relationship to culture—more often in opposition than accommodation—its most severe critic and reformer rather than its champion and celebrant.

This possibility rests upon what may at first appear to be a contradictory position, but is in fact a necessary concession to the perverted reality of the black man's religious situation in America. Before the whitenized black churches can immerse themselves in ecumenical Protestantism in the United States and perform their critical and reformatory role in relationship to the total culture from which they have been systematically excluded, these churches must immerse themselves in a black ecumenicity and in a black culture, both of which they have repudiated in the past, but for which they, nevertheless, have a peculiar responsibility.

Is this to say that the Christian faith as viewed through the black power movement is but yet another expression of an ethnocentric religion or culture? To this question we must today give a qualified affirmative answer. Qualified, because what we are seeking in the posture of black religion is temporary and transitional. A way of correcting the errors of the past and preparing the ground for the future. But we must insist that if the Christian church is to become a dynamic influence in the black community, which will continue for some time to come to be beleaguered by white racism, it must become not only a religious institution, but a community organization. It must develop and embrace an ideology of black power not only as a defense against the racism of the white church and white culture, but as a necessary alternative to the cynical, materialistic secularism toward which the black community is moving—especially the youth—in its flight from the dehumanizing effects of a spurious white Christian culture.

This is a hard saying that will not be readily accepted by our white Christian brethren. But the time has come when we who have accepted from their hands a religion devoid of an ethic relevant to our real situation and a culture in which we were never permitted to participate on equal terms, must stand back from them

to reassess our relationship to our own people and to the hostile society to which the white church continues in servile accommodation and for whose sake white Christians have betrayed us—their black brothers in Jesus Christ. We must stand back and be in a strategic Exodus from this unequal engagement, this degrading, debilitating embrace, until we have recovered our own sense of identity, our true relationship to the people we serve and until the white church is ready to enter into that partnership in life and mission which is able to renew the whole church of Christ.

Only under these conditions can we remain in these predominantly white denominations and maintain our connection to, much less our integrity in, a revolutionary black community, where God is bringing to naught the things which are and bringing into existence the things which do not exist. Unless black churchmen and black institutions within these historic denominations redefine their role in the black community in such terms as these, there is no sense in talking at all about the task of predominantly white denominations in relation to the black community.

IV.

Grace and James Boggs in one of their most provocative papers on the black revolution, speak of the city today as "the black man's land." There can no longer be any doubt of it. The report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders says, "Central cities are steadily becoming more heavily Negro, while the urban fringes around them remain almost entirely white. The proportion of Negroes in all central cities rose steadily from 12% in 1950, to 17% in 1960, to 20% in 1966. Meanwhile, metropolitan areas outside of central cities remained 95% white from 1950 to 1960, and became 96% white by 1966." (p. 243).

In the past 16 years 98% of black population growth has occurred within the metropolitan areas with 86% of that growth in the central cities. During approximately the same period the outflow of white population from these cities has been accelerating and with the greatest rapidity between 1960 and 1966 at the height of the civil rights movement. In the last six years, offsetting white population growth in the nation as a whole, about five million white people moved out (we might even say fled) from the central cities of the great metropolitan areas.

More will certainly follow, leaving the core areas to black people. The Kerner Commission reports eleven major cities, including Baltimore, St. Louis, Philadelphia and Chicago, that will become over 50% black between 1971 and 1984. (p. 391) Washington, D. C. and Newark have already gained majorities and all 13 of these cities which contained, as long ago as six years, 22% of the total population of all 224 American central cities, will have Negro majorities by 1985.

This contemporary phenomenon is so striking that expert predictions are avalanching. One popular estimate is that before the year 2000, blacks will constitute between 25 and 50% of the total population in at least ten of the fourteen largest central cities and in about 22 other important urban centers. Another is that 50 cities will have absolute black majorities by 1980. Whatever statistic one cares to consult it is clear that we are witnessing today what can only be called the blackanization of the American cities.

Whether or not this is the way the white church and society wanted it, this is what has happened and is happening wherever the black population is growing rapidly in relation to the white population. The church is powerless to arrest these trends. Indeed it has never even attempted to do so. Nothing underscores more obviously the subordination of the Christian missionary enterprise to the class stratification system and racism of the American society, for in these blackening cities the white church is dead or dying and will undoubtedly disappear in the next 50 years.

All we can say is that American religion has been compromised by the materialistic, ethnocentric secularism of the dominant white culture. This culture has made religion serve it, but in so doing it has emasculated religion, made it a static appendage of itself an adjunct of upward mobility and material success. White religion in the black man's land, therefore, is recessive. Black religion, at least in this period, is progressive. But only so where it has been permeated by the black man's yearning for social justice and, in these days, where it serves and is served by a conscious movement through which blacks seek both peopleness and power.

The evangelistic task and the renewal and unity of these two aspects, one black and the other white, of American Christianity, can be considered in the light of four possibilities.

First, the Consultation on Church Union may be able, within the next ten years, to unite in one church, on a precisely calculated basis of equality, the predominantly white and the predominantly black denominations. Despite the apparent openness of the white denominations and the fact that the three largest black Methodist bodies have remained in the consultation, this seems to be an unlikely possibility for the foreseeable future. Even if the three Methodist churches were to come into the union, the black Baptist and Pentecostal groups would be outside and they contain today such large numbers of Negroes that the interracial character of American Protestantism would be only slightly more discernible than it is today.

Indeed, one must ask if the success of COCU, even if *all* of the major black churches participated in the union, would affect the *de facto* segregation of the American churches in any real sense? Without limiting the power of the Holy Spirit, it is difficult to imagine that within the present century we will see a sufficient distribution of the black population throughout the nation and a

sufficient diminution of color prejudice to integrate existing and new local congregations to such an extent as to have more than a small proportion of blacks and whites worshipping together on Sunday morning. We should no longer delude ourselves if we are going to get about the real business of evangelism.

But even more important in the present climate of black awareness is the necessity of black churches dealing with their own disunity and irrelevance in the ghetto. In view of the new role that the younger clergy are discovering in relation to the black power movement it is improbable that they, at least for the next few years, will be easily persuaded to turn time and attention from the mobilization of black people for community action to prepare their people for delicate ecumenical encounters with white churches and the interminable red tape of church union.

One thing is certainly clear as one studies the COCU reports, unless the Consultation is more willing to dialogue on the thorny issues of race and face more forthrightly the psychological, theological and structural problems of authentic church integration in an increasingly polarized and racist society, there is even less hope that black churchmen will do more than go along for the ride until the white brethren get the message that evidently has not been communicated up to now.

A second possibility emerges for the predominant white denominations in the present crisis. It is to release their most competent black urban pastors to study the total resources and characteristics of each black congregation in terms of its revolutionary function in the black community and to recommend whatever radical reallocation of national and judicatory resources should go into these churches to cast them into a new posture and relationship to the black community.

One of the pitfalls that would have to be scrupulously avoided here would be the temptation to return to the old concepts of "Negro work" with its ingratiating and patronizing connotations. It would be highly desirable for some black ecumenical mechanism to be created in neighborhoods or sectors of the metropolitan area which would serve as a conduit, an indirect means and strategy for channeling large sums, with no strings attached, from national and regional sources to local communities. IFCO, of course, is already involved in some such intermediate operation between sources of church funds and ghetto communities. Its basic purpose and scope, however, as well as its resources, are not elaborate enough to serve the objectives envisioned in this model. What is called for is a large scale, multi-million dollar mission enterprise of black cluster ministries, lay apostolates, experimental ministries and ecumenical task forces in black communities, all oriented toward community organization and militant political and economic action programs undergirded by a black theological and cultural renaissance.

The question is whether we can now design and finance this new secular mission in the black community, recruit and train both its lay and clerical leadership across denominational lines, and project it into the vortex of the black revolution in such dramatic ways as to attract and serve not only the black poor, but also the increasingly alienated black youth, the new Afro-American student generation and the emerging middle class. While we are obviously talking about Blacktown, U. S. A. (which, from all indications, will be with us for some time to come) there are instrumentalities and cadres which can serve the function of a nexus with Whitetown, U. S. A., interpenetrating and extending across the checkerboard communities and structures that will undoubtedly exist in-between.

A third possibility exists in the proposals which have been put forth for the predominantly white Protestant denominations to stop worrying about organic union among themselves and reapproachment with Roman Catholicism and begin to enter, on an unprecedented scale, into ecumenical relations in life and work with the five great all-black denominations and about twenty-four smaller churches which comprise more than 90% of all black Protestants in the United States.

This is not a suggestion that black and white denominations simply exchange fraternal greetings and enroll each other's prestigious churchmen at church conventions. What is meant is that the white denominations begin to do joint planning for a total mission to the merging megalopolises or regional cities *with* the black denominations. Actually given the mission structure of many of these black churches it may mean joint planning and strategy execution between key black congregations and key white congregations and white urban mission structures.

The inequality of financial and material wealth among these entities could be neutralized to some extent if the white denominations learned to accept from black hands what God has given and when black churches learn that black religion has something to give to the whole Church of Christ. White churches may give money. Black churches which are not affluent may give contributions *in kind* for the development and execution of various kinds of non-residential and urban fringe ministries beamed to the middle classes, joint missionary education and teacher training projects, joint liturgical study and renewal and new concepts in seminary education, recruitment and placement. The possibilities for black-white cooperation, short of organic union, are myriad, even given the present mood, if the black churches and churchmen are given a little respect—in the profound sense that word has taken on in the "soul community."

It is perhaps too obvious to mention that in such joint mission strategy planning and action such groups as the denominational black caucuses, the emerging geographical black caucuses and the

National Committee of Negro Churchmen should be consulted and utilized to the fullest extent.

The three possibilities for the evangelistic advance of predominantly white churches upon territory now occupied by black congregations—whether of the white or of the historic black denominations—depend finally not upon money or real estate or equipment. Their success depends upon the determination of the white churches to attack the racism within their ranks and institutional structures with the same vigor and holy zeal with which they threw themselves into missionary activity among people of color in the South following Emancipation and in Asia and Africa in the 19th century.

Perhaps it will take even more effort than this in the struggle against the systemic racism and the covert racist presuppositions and myths of the white churches. But there are no real possibilities for mission in the black community, joint or otherwise, until the white church establishment begins to use church law to deal with racism among its members, to force compliance with official policy and pronouncement and to desegregate every aspect of church life—beginning with the bureaucratic structures where decision-making power lies, running through the mission agencies, educational institutions and local churches, and continuing to decisions about questions of qualifications, recruitment, training and creating new opportunities of meaning and worth for black leadership.

V.

It scarcely needs emphasis at this point that the concept of urban evangelism with which we have been dealing is something other than the evangelism of the Graham crusades. Notwithstanding the traditional religiosity of many black churches, the white denominations dare not seek to return to the cities with a soul-saving, moralizing approach to the evangelistic task.

The proclamation and demonstration of the good news about Jesus Christ—a Jesus Christ who himself must be reinterpreted from the sidewalks of the secular city that is the black man's land—must focus on those points where personal troubles bisect social issues; where God meets and deals with individual men in the context of their corporate relationships to the opportunity systems, the political realities and the economic goods and services which can give men freedom and happiness.

In a world that God made for all to enjoy and live in to the full, some men have taken more of their share of the power which makes the good life possible. In their dehumanization of other men they make faith in a just God impossible. The church that is engaged in the business of evangelism comes into this situation with power, speaks the word of judgment and performs the act of mercy which reveals unmistakably that the God whom it serves is the one of whom Mary said:

“He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered
the proud in the imagination of their hearts,
He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and
exalted those of low degree;
He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich
he has sent empty away.” (Luke 1:51-53)

Men and women, boys and girls, *may* be drawn to such a church as this. We cannot be sure in these incredulous days. We do know that in such a time no other church can call and minister to the poor, the secularists, the black power radicals and all the other alienated persons and groups which the churches, black and white, have abandoned and ignored. But whether they will forgive and come into a renewed and renewing household of faith is really God's business. Ours is to be faithful in our service to the world, in his Name.

Now is the time for the American churches to demonstrate what that service means in this new day that is breaking all over the nation. The white church, for more than two centuries, held up before the weary, sweat-blinded eyes of black men, without power or self-respect, the image of a white, middle-class Christ—turning their eyes away from themselves, from their poor and from the failures and hypocricies of that very form of Christianity which was being commended to them.

But a new day is dawning. Black Christians, who today are finding themselves and one another, are imbued with a strange, new sense of their own significance and power in both the black and the white community and the peculiar role which God may be calling upon them to play.

Just as the lay movements within the Western Church sought to judge and purify and finally changed various strains and eras of main line white Christianity, just as Father Divine, Daddy Grace, Malcolm X and the Muslims judged and changed the black church in the United States, the black church within the broken body of American Christendom judges it and—if it pleases God—may renew and unite it. The seeds of the renewal and the redemption of the Christian Church in our time may lie within the long-anguished souls and suffering bodies of black Christians.