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THE BLACK CHURCH
Its Development and Present Impact

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Outline

Introduction

The Black church, historically, is the most significant institution in the Black community.

I. History and Development of the Black Church
   A. There were differences of opinion with respect to whether slaves should be Christianized.
   B. The Christian religion was accepted by the slaves because it offered hope and salvation.
   C. Although at first religious instruction was given the slaves, this was later discontinued, then renewed after the Revolutionary War.
   D. Three major denominations split over the question of slavery.
   E. Independent churches were established by free Negroes in the North.
   F. Negro churches also established in the South as early as 1773.
   G. Following the Civil War, Negro churches were established in large numbers in the South.
      1. This was an expression of the new freedom.
      2. The Black church was the primary basis of social cohesion.
   H. The Federal Government and Northern White denominations established schools for the training of preachers immediately after the Civil War.
   I. During Reconstruction, the Black church sponsored developments in education, politics, and small-scale economic enterprises.
   J. Black churchmen who were members of predominantly White denominations sought for increased recognition and influence in their parent bodies.
II. The Black Church as a Social Force
   A. The Black church is still the primary source of social cohesion in the Black community.
   B. Worship in the Black church is generally characterized by a high degree of emotionalism.
   C. Today, emphasis is being shifted from otherworldliness to the socio-economic and political problems of the community.

III. The Black Church and the Small Sects
   A. It is estimated that there are thirty-one fairly significant independent small sects or cults among the Black communities.
   B. These cults appeal, for the most part, to the economically underprivileged.
   C. These cults are characterized by emotional fervor and strong loyalty to their leaders.

IV. The Message of the Black Church
   A. Historically, the theological emphases have been fundamentalist and literalistic.
   B. The "Social Gospel" is increasingly being emphasized.
   C. Some Black ministers are now identifying with the Black Power concept.
   D. There is an emphasis on what is called "Black Theology."
   E. Black churchmen have effected new organizations and alignments to promote an interpretation of the Christian faith which is more meaningful to Black people.

Conclusion
The Black church may prove to be a major factor in the revitalization of Christianity in America.

It has been long recognized that the Black church has had a significant role in the development of the Black community. It has served as a bulwark of spiritual and moral strength and a center for the total life of the people and a source of leadership which, through the years, has guided the Black people toward the goal of increasingly fuller participation in American life. In this paper we shall examine the development of the Black church, its present status, and some of the ways in which it has made its impact upon the Black community as well as upon the nation as a whole.
When the Blacks were first brought to the new world, they were given instruction in the Christian religion. At first there was no agreement with respect to this matter, for some believed that it would be a source of discontent and restlessness on the part of the slaves if they became Christians. Eventually, however, it was determined that such instruction would not be a threat to the community in spite of the fact that for one to be a Christian and a slave at the same time was held by some to be an untenable status.

It is anomalous that Whites, who maintained belief in the principles of Christianity, should teach other human beings those principles while holding them in abject slavery. It is also a matter of wonder that these slaves could accept the religion of their masters as freely as they did. The explanation may be found in the fact that the Christian faith was a religion which offered salvation and spiritual security to all persons regardless of their status in life. The Blacks accepted wholeheartedly this particular aspect of the Christian religion and, in doing so, recognized that those who taught them this religion did not always practice it themselves. This gave rise to the line in one of the well-known spirituals which says, “I got shoes, you got shoes, all God’s chil’un got shoes. When I get to heaven, I’m goin’ to put on my shoes, but everybody talkin’ about heaven ain’t goin’ there.” When they repeated this last line, they definitely had in mind the White masters who in all too many instances exercised great cruelty over their slaves, even though these slaves were their fellow Christians. In general, the Negro spirituals represent one of the most significant aspects of Negro life in America. The “songs of sorrow, love and hope,” to use James Weldon Johnson’s designation, were the product of the total frustrations and strivings of the slaves. As Johnson put it, while they sang these songs, “their spirits nightly floated free, though still about their hands they felt the chains.” From the sociological viewpoint, the spirituals represent, along with what Frazier calls “the invisible church,” a basis of unity for the Black community.¹ John Lovell sums it up succinctly when he says that the Negro

analyzed and synthesized his life in his songs and sayings. In hundreds of songs called spirituals, he produced an epic cycle; and, as in every such instance, he concealed there his deepest thoughts and ideas, his hard-finished plans and hopes and dreams. The exploration of these songs for their social truths presents a tremendous problem. It must be done, for, as in the kernel of the *Iliad* lies the genius of the Greeks, so in the kernel of the spiritual lies the genius of the American Negro.²

Religious instruction was given to the slaves as early as 1695. The British "Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts" was the primary agency in this endeavor.³ It is reported that by 1705 as many as 1,000 slaves had been given Christian religious instruction in the Colony of South Carolina. This movement spread to other Colonies. In North Carolina, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and New York there were a number of communities in which slaves were accepted and baptized into membership in Christian churches. In 1743 a school in Charleston, South Carolina was opened for the special purpose of training Negroes to do missionary work. This school continued for 20 years and sent out a number of workers who carried on their Christianizing activities in many parts of the State.⁴ It is also of interest to note that prior to the Civil War a number of Black men distinguished themselves by their ability to interpret the Scriptures. Some of these became well known and well received as preachers of the Gospel by both Blacks and Whites alike. Following the Revolutionary War, by which time it had been legally established that slaves could be converted to Christianity and still remain in their slave status, the evangelization of the Blacks was greatly accelerated.

In the meantime, however, there was a growing sentiment on the part of some Christians in the North against the institution of slavery itself. This sentiment was predominant in the North, although there were a few southerners who inveighed against

slavery. Of the larger denominational groups, the Quakers were the ones who developed and maintained a consistent policy against the institution. The Methodist church early took a stand against their members holding slaves. Later on, however, this stand was somewhat modified. Nevertheless, the controversy became increasingly intense, so that toward the middle of the 19th Century opinions began to crystallize on the part of members of the leading denominations. What has been sometimes referred to as the "great schism" occurred between the years 1837 and 1845, when the Methodists and the Baptists and the Presbyterians separated along geographical lines, representing the sentiments for or against slavery. Thus, the Southern Baptist Convention was organized separately from the Northern Baptist Convention. The Southern Methodists separated from the Methodist Episcopal Church and took the name "Methodist Church, South." Branches of the Presbyterian churches developed largely as a result of this controversy.

Prior to this division, however, it had become clear that in some churches the Negroes were not welcome. Even if they were received into the building during hours of worship, they were not welcome to be seated where they pleased. In some instances they were seated in the gallery. Controversy over the seating of Negro members in a Methodist church in Philadelphia resulted in the Negroes seceding from that church and eventually establishing a denomination of their own known as the African Methodist Episcopal Church. One Sunday in 1787, as the Reverend Richard Allen, a free Negro and the first preacher of this movement, and a Reverend Absolom Jones were worshipping in the St. George Methodist church in Philadelphia, they took a place in the gallery which was reserved for White persons, and, during a period of prayer, they were forcibly removed to another part of the gallery; whereupon Allen, Jones, and the other Negroes left the church, never to return. Allen describes it thus:

We had not been long upon our knees before I heard considerable scuffling and low talking. I raised my head up and saw one of the

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Woodson, op. cit., 29-30."
trustees . . . having hold of the Rev. Absolom Jones, pulling him up off his knees, and saying, "You must get up — you must not kneel here." . . . We all went out of the church in a body, and they were no more plagued with us.7

Meanwhile, under the leadership of Richard Allen, the Free African Society was established in Philadelphia, and later, in 1816, Allen called together representatives of Negro Methodists from Maryland, Delaware, and New Jersey and established the African Methodist Episcopal Church. During this period another Negro minister, James Varick, withdrew from the John Street Methodist church in New York City on account of the policy of segregation he encountered there. He built a new church in 1800, and in 1820 he founded the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Other Methodist churches had similar beginnings. In those instances in which Negro Baptists could establish their own centers of worship, they chose to do so, for their fellow White Christians were not prepared to accept them as equals. In this respect, it can be said that in large measure the Negro church is a child of protest; for had the Whites been willing to accept Negroes on a basis of equality in their congregations, it is hardly likely that the Negroes would have been constrained to establish their own centers of worship as they did.

While, during this period, Negro Baptists formed separate regional organizations in the free states, they did not establish a separate denomination. The earliest of these associations was formed in Ohio in 1836 and in Illinois in 1838. In New England in 1840 the American Baptist Missionary Convention was formed, and in 1853 the associations in Ohio and Illinois united with other Negro groups from the Western Colored Baptist Convention.8

In the meantime, there developed among the Whites misgivings with regard to training Blacks in the Christian religion. This was due, in large measure, to the fear that as a result of becoming inducted into the Christian church, Negroes would develop a spirit of freedom from and resentment to their status. This fear was all the more intensified as a result of the insurrection in 1831 led by Nat Turner in Virginia. When it was learned that Nat Turner

7 Quoted in Reimers, op. cit., 12.
8 Woodson, op. cit., 122.
was a preacher, a suspicion was cast on all Negro preachers as well as on Negroes generally in regard to their holding religious services. Consequently, in many communities, it was forbidden for Negroes to hold religious services. In some instances, they were allowed to hold such services provided "respectable" White preachers or other persons were in attendance. This led to what is called the "Dark Days" of Negro religion. It is noteworthy that despite the prohibitions against having religious services, the Blacks persisted in having them secretly. Some of the spirituals that have survived to this day are said to have been originally sung as signal songs. "Down by the Riverside" and "Steal Away to Jesus" are examples. When these songs were sung, it was an announcement that a secret religious service was to be held that night.

A number of Black churches were founded prior to the Civil War in both the slave and the free states. The first Negro Baptist Church in America, and perhaps the first of any denomination, was established in Silver Bluff, South Carolina, just across the river from Augusta, Georgia between the years 1773 and 1775.9 Out of this group came the first Negro Baptist church in Georgia, which flourished between 1779 and 1792.10 Among other early Negro churches were certain ones founded in Petersburg, Virginia, Richmond, Virginia, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The principal leaders of these churches were, of course, the free Negroes, some of whom had gained their freedom by virtue of their demonstrated spiritual gifts. The majority of these early churches are still thriving today.

Following the Civil War, Negroes had a developing sense of freedom along many lines. This new-found freedom was expressed in many ways, and perhaps the most important to them was the freedom to worship in their own way, freedom to establish their own churches, and the freedom to select and support their own ministers. The religious meetings and expressions of the Blacks had in the past served as the principal means of social cohesion,11 and now it was at long last possible for them to establish church

9 Ibid., 41.
10 Ibid., 43.
11 Frazier, op. cit., 6, et passim.
organizations, conduct their meetings, and engage their ministers without the supervision and control of their former masters. The Black preachers were the ones who had the most learning. The people looked to them for leadership, not only in religious matters, but in all other areas of life as well.

The Baptist and the Methodist churches had the most appeal to the freedmen, primarily because the services were simpler than those of the more liturgical denominations, and there was ample opportunity for the highly emotional expression which was characteristic of the Blacks. Moreover, the Baptist denomination was particularly suited for this group because the polity of this persuasion allowed for the greatest amount of freedom in the establishment of churches and the qualifying of ministers. If a man expressed a “call” to preach, it was a simple matter for him to secure ordination by other local ministers and engage in pastoral activities. Although there had been some notable Black preachers prior to the Civil War, the majority of the ministers at the close of the War had little, if any, training. They made up in zeal what they lacked in knowledge, and they provided a quality of leadership which inspired many of their followers to improve their condition.

The Sunday Schools played a most important role in the development of the Blacks during this period. There, children as well as adults studied the Scriptures, and, incidentally, learned much about the periods of history covered by the Bible, as well as principles of morality, some philosophy and psychology. All received practice in learning to read as they studied the Scriptures in the Sunday Schools and at home.12 Thus acquiring this basic tool of learning, they were better prepared for reading other materials and participation in the life of the community.

In the meantime, the Federal Government took the initiative in the establishment of schools for the freedmen after the Civil War. The Freedmen's Bureau, established by an act of Congress in 1865, which gave judicial, legislative, and executive authority to a commissioner over the four million Negroes just released from slavery, played a significant role in the establishment of educational opportunities for them. The Bureau gave considerable

12 Ibid., 39.
assistance to certain denominational groups in the establishment
and maintenance of schools for the freedmen, of which at least
twelve are still in operation. Practically all of the schools estab-
lished during this period had as their leading purpose the training
of ministers; for, as indicated above, ministers constituted the
principal leaders of the Black community, and it was most essen-
tial that they receive adequate preparation for their important
tasks.

The missionary spirit of the northern White churches expressed
itself in the establishment of schools for the freedmen in all parts
of the South. The American Missionary Association, supported
largely by Congregationalists, was one of the principal religious
organizations in this movement. The Baptists, Methodists, Pres-
byterians, and Episcopalians of the North all sent missionary
teachers to the South. Had it not been for the contribution to the
education of the Blacks which these denominations made, the
freedmen would have had a quite difficult time securing the prep-
paration they needed for full participation in the life of the nation.
The church-established schools trained men and women in the
rudiments of learning and provided a base for the cultural en-
hancement of the Black people which is yielding its fruits today.

During the Reconstruction period Negroes engaged in consid-
erable political activity. They served as representatives on im-
portant local and state boards, in the state legislatures and in the
Congress of the United States. Two of the twenty Negroes who
served in the Congress were ministers. The politicians depended
upon the church and their leaders for support, and those ministers
who did not run for public office encouraged their constituency to
support those who did so.

In the economic sphere, the Black churches were the matrix
out of which some significant enterprises were developed. In
many of the churches burial societies were organized, which pro-
vided for their members a respectable burial as a result of the
small weekly or monthly dues they paid in. In addition, small-
scale insurance companies formed the basis of further development
of business experience and in other fields.

18 B. T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois, The Negro in the South (Phila-
delphia: George W. Jacobs and Co., 1907).
Prior to 1900, and beyond, the Black churches experienced rapid growth both in numbers of organizations and in membership. By 1895, when various organizations of the Negro Baptists organized nationally as the National Baptist Convention, the total membership was estimated as three million persons.

Negro churches may be classified with respect to whether they constitute denominations which are independent and separate from Whites, or whether they are affiliated with predominantly White denominations. The independent or strictly Negro denominations consist of Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, who represent the largest groups, and a large number of smaller sects. Churches belonging to the National Baptist Conventions, of which there are three such organizations, represent a total membership of more than eight million people. The next largest groups are the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, with a total membership of 1,936,301.

There is a large number of smaller independent Negro denominations with membership ranging from 600 to 400,000. Most of these denominations are comprised of churches whose appeal is primarily to the economically and educationally least privileged in the Black community. Many of them are characterized by a high degree of emotionalism with emphasis upon “sanctification,” “holiness,” or “purity.” These denominations play a significant role in the life of the Black community, for in these churches the underprivileged Negro feels much more at home than in the larger churches, where he often feels ignored.

There are a number of Negroes who belong to predominantly White churches. The latest estimate is that there are approximately 800,000 Black persons in all who are members of congregations thus affiliated. Chief among these are those who belong to the United Methodist Church, the Protestant Episcopal Church, the Adventist Church, and the United Church of Christ (Congregational-Christian).

It is estimated that there are approximately 774,000 Negroes who are members of the Catholic church. There is evidence of a

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15 Loc. cit.
rapidly growing number of Negroes who have joined the Catholic church since 1949. According to Reuben L. Speaks, during the years 1949–1954, Negro membership in the Catholic church increased by 55 per cent. Among the reasons given for this increase are the following:

1. Negroes felt that to become Catholic enhanced their economic status.
2. Negroes felt that the Catholic church is rapidly becoming their most faithful ally in the struggle for economic improvements.
3. Negroes felt that among the religious groups the Roman Catholic church is by far the most interracial.
4. Negroes felt that they would find it easier to live among Roman Catholics of immigrant stock than among White Protestants.

Speaks also notes that when a neighborhood changes from White to Black, unlike the White Protestant churches, the Catholic church seldom moves to the suburbs — it remains to serve the new population. Frazier cites as another reason for increased Negro membership the fact that middle-class Negro parents are impressed by the high quality of education available in the Catholic parochial schools.

The northern branch of the Methodist Episcopal Church maintained for a long time direct relations with a large number of Negro congregations bearing the same name. Negroes were not happy with the fact that they were nominally a part of the main church but were not permitted to rise to positions of leadership and policy-making of any importance. As early as 1876, Negro Methodists began to petition for more positions of influence, including the election of a Black bishop who would be responsible for their welfare. It was not until 1920 that the first Black man was appointed bishop by the Methodist church.

The problem of segregation in the church was a major factor in determining whether or not the northern and southern Methodists could achieve unification. It was a problem to the southern Methodists primarily because the church is, among other things, a social institution, and to have the Negro churches in the same

16 "Will the Negro Remain Protestant?" Christian Century (June 2, 1954).
17 FRAZIER, op. cit., 8.
18 REIMERS, op. cit., 75.
conference and jurisdiction with the White churches would create problems the latter were not prepared to meet. It was in 1939 that the issue was finally resolved, but resolved on the basis of segregation. All the Negro Methodists were united in one jurisdiction regardless of their geographical location; this was called the Central Jurisdiction. The creation of this district made it possible for the Black Methodists to have their own bishops. Many Black people resented this arrangement as well as did some Whites, and, accordingly, it was under attack from the very beginning by those churchmen who did not countenance a segregated jurisdiction within the ecclesiastical community. In May, 1968, however, when the Methodist Episcopal Church united with the Evangelical United Brethren denomination and assumed the name United Methodist Church, the Central Jurisdiction was abolished and the church became, theoretically at least, and in some instances, practically, integrated. There are, in a few instances, Black ministers who serve predominantly White congregations and Black presiding elders who administer predominantly White jurisdictions. Some of the old exclusive Negro and exclusive White conferences have become integrated.

Among the Negro Episcopalians, there was, for a long time, a similar insistence upon their having their own bishops. An attempt was made to settle the problem by the appointment of a suffragan or assistant bishop who would have charge over Negro parishes but would not have the right to succeed to the regular bishopric. In spite of the opposition of many Negroes to this plan, the Episcopal church put it into effect, and some Black priests have been elevated to the bishopric. It was not until 1962 that a Black priest, Reverend John Burgess, was elected as suffragan bishop over a predominantly White diocese (Massachusetts). Later, in January, 1970, Bishop Burgess was invested as the presiding bishop over the state of Massachusetts with a membership of 125,000 persons.

In the other denominations there has been much of the same kinds of efforts toward Black ministers and laymen assuming more and more positions of responsibility. The most recent development along these lines include Negroes elected as presidents

19 Reimers, op. cit., 66ff.
of major denominational boards and to executive positions in the denomination at large. In 1964, a Black minister, Reverend Edler Hawkins, was elected Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of the United States. In 1967, the United Christian Church elected a Black minister, Reverend Joseph H. Evans, as its Executive Secretary. In May, 1969, the northern Baptists, now known as the American Baptist Convention, elected a Black pastor, Reverend Thomas J. Kilgore of Los Angeles, as its President. A Black minister, Reverend Richard M. Owens, has served as President of the Massachusetts Baptist Convention. These developments indicate that there is a ferment in America with regard to the position which Black Christians should have in the total life of the church.

THE BLACK CHURCH AS A SOCIAL FORCE

As has been indicated, the historical role of the Black church has been one of serving as a center of social cohesion. E. Franklin Frazier, in his notable work, *The Negro Church in America*, points out that the Black man was stripped of his tribal heritage as he was uprooted from his native Africa and brought to this country. The only way in which the representatives of the various tribal groups could find a sense of meaning as they made their adjustment to the conditions of slavery was in the religious life of the slave community. Here they found a basis of unity, here they found a sense of meaning to their existence, here they found the emotional support which the conditions of slavery required. It is understandable that in the worship of the Black church during this period there would be a strong element of emotion, for this provided a needed release from the tensions they developed in their day-to-day experience.

Today the Black church performs much of the same function, although not to as great an extent as in the past. Other organizations and professional groups are sharing this role among the Black people. Notable among these are the legal profession, successful businessmen, the educational profession, the medical profession, and labor leaders. Within the Negro leadership class,

20 Frazier, *op. cit.*, Chap. I.
Negro ministers represent the largest component. Daniel C. Thompson has listed two main reasons why this is so:

1. The Negro Protestant Church was the first, and in some respects it remains the only, major social institution in which a significant number of Negroes with varying talents and academic preparation have found opportunities for self-expression, the development of self-respect and racial pride, professional employment, and leadership training.

2. The Negro church is the “parent” of most other organizations and agencies in the Negro community. In some instances the apparentization is widely recognized, as is the case with insurance companies that developed from burial-aid societies. Also most Negro institutions of higher education still claim affiliation with various religious bodies that founded them. There is also a kind of indirect apparentization whereby benevolent orders and certain Negro “uplift” organizations are nurtured by Protestant churches as an extension of their missionary functions. Important in this connection are lodges and racial-improvement associations, which look to the church for their legitimization or a major portion of their social and financial support.21

Worship in the Black church is characterized, to some extent, by a high degree of emotionalism, with the exception, of course, of such denominations as the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians, whose membership is comprised, for the most part, of persons who have a relatively high educational and social status. This emotionalism has served as a source of tension release, as we have already indicated; at the same time, however, it has tended to keep the masses from thinking about and working to alleviate some of the basic economic and political social problems they face. This is to say, historically and until recent time, the religion of the Black churches was primarily otherworldly. This is understandable in view of the frustrations which Black people encountered as they tried to live their lives in a White world, which at many points was predominantly hostile. Naturally, as they could not enjoy heaven here, they looked forward to enjoying it in the next life. Preachers emphasized this as a matter of spiritual sup-

port to their members. They preached what has been referred to as “a pie in the sky, by and by” philosophy. In their frustration, the people sang, “You can have this world, but give me Jesus.”

As of today, however, there has been a strong shift in emphasis on the part of the Black clergy. The church has turned its attention to the problems of the day and the immediate situations in which the people find themselves. In doing so, it has met a challenge suggested by the Swedish sociologist, Gunnar Myrdal, in his classic study of the American race problem. Writing in the early 'forties, Myrdal had this to say about the Black church:

Potentially, the Negro church is undoubtedly a power institution. It has the masses organized and if the church bodies decided to do so, they could line up the Negro behind a program. Actually the Negro church is, on the whole, passive in the field of intercaste power relations. It generally provides meeting halls and encourages members to attend when other organizations want to influence the Negro. But viewed as an instrument of collective action the church has been relatively inefficient and unimfluential. In the South it has not taken the lead in attacking the caste system or even bringing about minor reforms, in the North it has only occasionally been a strong force for social action. This is deemed deplorable, but it should not be surprising. Christian churches generally have, for the most part, conformed to the power situation of the time and locality. They have favored a passive acceptance of one's worldly condition and have seen their main function in providing escape and consolation to the sufferers.22

In recent years, however, the Black church has indeed become a power institution. It is quite natural that the Black church should be the fountainhead for the civil rights movement, which was inaugurated on a large scale in this country when Mrs. Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama on December 1, 1955. Upon hearing of Mrs. Parks' arrest, the Negro community was greatly aroused. A mass meeting was held in a local church, attended virtually by all the local ministers. When they sought for one to lead the protest of Mrs. Parks' arrest, along with the general treatment received by Ne-
groes in public accommodations in Montgomery, they looked to the ministers, and after some hesitation, Martin Luther King accepted the responsibility of organizing and leading the famous bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, which resulted in a ruling by the Supreme Court outlawing segregation in public transportation. This protest in Alabama sparked similar ones in other cities of the South. In each case, the church was a focal point of the movement, and the ministers were the leaders. Incidentally, it is of interest to observe that the leaders were principally of the Baptist faith for the simple reason that local autonomy is basic in the form of organization of the Baptist church. The ministers are responsible only to their congregations, rather than to a hierarchy. In those instances where ministers of a hierarchical denomination assumed positions of protest, they were subject to reprisal. The present writer knows of one instance of a dynamic young Presbyterian clergyman in Florida who, because of his role in leading a protest against segregation on city buses, had his salary cut off by the board which was responsible for financing his work.

In each of the cities where protests were held, the people went nightly to the church for announcements, directions, and, more basically, spiritual and moral renewal. It is hardly likely that the protest movement would have succeeded as well as it did had it not been for the churches and the role they played in providing guidance and inspiration. The Montgomery Improvement Association, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and other local movements all came as the result of the leadership of the Black ministers and their constituencies. Today, the leadership of the Black community is comprised of a large percentage of Black ministers of various denominations.

In the churches, the appeals are made for membership in and support of civil rights movements such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Urban League, and local community movements including the support of Black candidates for political offices or White candidates who are sympathetic to the needs of the Black community.

Negro ministers have taken the leadership in providing economic opportunities for members of the Black community. In
Philadelphia, Rev. Leon Sullivan pioneered a project for training Black people for positions in business and industry, which has attracted nationwide attention, and, known as the Opportunities Industrialization Center, this movement has inspired similar programs in other urban centers. "Operation Breadbasket" was a program started in Chicago under the leadership of a young Black clergyman, Rev. Jesse Jackson, representing the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. This movement urged Black people to patronize only those stores that provided work opportunities for members of the Black community. Similarly, in Harlem, Detroit, and other cities, Negro ministers have led protest movements of this kind to provide recognition of the rights of Negroes to buy where they can work.

In politics, the Black church has provided, once again, a leadership that has resulted in Black politicians achieving positions in local, state, and national governments. A Black minister in Philadelphia, the late Marshall Shepard, served as Recorder of Deeds under appointment by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Shepard had also served as a member of the Pennsylvania State Legislature. One well-known Black minister, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., for a long time was consistently returned to Congress by his constituency. In other instances, Black ministers have served as members of their state legislatures, and have used their congregations as the primary bases of support. They have inspired other Negroes to try for national office with an increasing degree of success. In general, it can be said that, as a political force, the Black church has been in the vanguard of the civil rights struggle in America.

Many ministers have had their homes bombed or destroyed as well as their churches. In one tragic instance, four little girls in Birmingham died when their church was bombed during Sunday School. In spite of this, the Negro ministers and churches have continued the struggle.

A well-known professor of political science, Dr. G. James Fleming, has listed the following among the accomplishments of the Negro clergy and churches during the civil rights struggle:

1. Negroes have challenged discrimination in registration for voting in countless jurisdictions;
THE BLACK CHURCH

2. they have lowered racial bars at hotels and motels;
3. they have integrated all-white churches against their original will;
4. they have prevented the political power structure in different localities from redistricting them out of political involvement and political office;
5. they have defeated some notable racist public officers;
6. they have opened schools that were closed to them;
7. they have boycotted unfriendly businesses until they offered employment to Negroes;
8. they have helped to bring into being an extensive series of programs intended to give Negroes a chance to overcome past handicaps in schooling and job opportunity;
9. they have lowered barriers in the public service;
10. they have brought Congress into seeing that laws had to be passed to implement the Constitution so that "we the people" would mean all Americans in every aspect of the national life.\(^2\)

No account of the Black church is complete without some attention given to the large number of small sects which attract certain members of the Negro community. These sects began to arise about the turn of the century, during a period of industrial and economic upheaval. They are, in large measure, associated with urban communities; and they appeal mostly to the socially, economically, and educationally underprivileged members of the Negro community. Ira De A. Reid indicated with respect to these sects that:

Their influence and reach are enormous and significant and perhaps more socially adapted to the sensationalism and other unique characteristics of city life, and the arduousness and vital realities of race, by the prayerful procrastinations of the church institutions they now supplant.\(^2\)

Some of these sects are the results of differences in doctrine from the major denominations from which they separated. They

are variously known as "Holiness," "Church of God," "Apostolic," and the like. In most instances these sects maintain their basic doctrinal affiliation with the Christian or Judaic heritage. In other instances the emphases have been on Black nationalism, representing an attempt to establish a new basis for self-respect, which it was felt the Black people needed.

One researcher has classified these cults according to their emphasis as follows: 25

1. Faith Healing
2. Holiness
3. Islamic (or Nationalistic)
4. Pentecostal
5. Spiritualist

The Spiritualist group is relatively small. It is to be noted that one cult may emphasize more than one of these basic characteristics.

Among the more well-known cults are the Father Divine Peace Mission Movement, the United House of Prayer for All People, the Church of God (Black Jews), the Moorish Science Temple of America, the Black Muslims, and the Mount Sinai Holy Church of America. Most of these cults have leaders who possess the unique quality known as charisma. They are able to attract people to them by the force of their personalities, and they enlist, without very much effort, blind loyalty on the part of their followers. The members will frequently support these movements at the price of great personal financial sacrifices on their part.

During the 'thirties and 'forties, the most spectacular of these movements was led by Father Divine. Father Divine was born and reared in the deep South and later moved to the North, where in Sayville, New Jersey, he became famous. The extent of his success is probably due to the fact that his movement began during the time of depression in the country. Father Divine promised and delivered total security for his people. No follower of his suffered for the necessities of life. Meals and lodging were either free or much less than could be secured elsewhere. He was called "God" by his followers, a designation which he himself

25 Ibid., 9.
neither denied nor affirmed. Some of his followers were White persons who were caught up by the attraction of his personality and the tremendous faith of his followers. Father Divine's followers believed that since he was God, it was inconceivable to think of his dying. It is now generally agreed that he has died, but this movement continues.

The second most significant of these movements was the United House of Prayer for All People, led by Bishop "Daddy" Grace. Like the Father Divine Peace Mission Movement, "Daddy" Grace succeeded because of the dynamism of his personality. Like Father Divine's Movement, also, branches were established in various parts of the country.

In most of the cults, meetings are characterized by extreme emotionalism. Sometimes devotees fall into a trance, sometimes they speak in tongues. In general, the small sects have an appeal to their constituencies, for one reason because members of these groups feel freer to express themselves in the smaller churches than in the larger and more established Negro congregations. The economically depressed tend not to feel at home in the larger congregations.

One of the best studies of these cults was made by Arthur Huff Fauset, entitled Black Gods of the Metropolis. Among Fauset's conclusions are the following:

Negroes are attracted to the cults for the obvious reason that, with few normal outlets of expression for Negroes in America due to the prevailing custom of racial bicameralism, the cults offer on the one hand the boon of religion with all its attempted promise of Heaven either here or above or both; and on the other hand they provide for certain Negroes with imagination and other dynamic qualities, in an atmosphere free from embarrassment or apology, a place where they may experiment in activities such as business, politics, social reform, and social expression; thereby these American Negroes satisfy the normal urge of any member of our culture who wishes to contribute positively to the advancement of the group.\(^{26}\)

The rise of these cults is sometimes attributed to the supposed extreme "religiosity" of the Negroes, but this extreme religiosity

\(^{26}\)Ibid., 107–09.
is not supported by statistics. A study made by Mays and Nicholson in 1933 indicated that there is little difference between the proportion of Negroes who are church members and the proportion of church members to the total population as a whole. The Mays and Nicholson study indicated that more than 40 per cent of Negroes do not attend church as compared with 42 per cent in America as a whole.\(^{27}\) Their study further shows that the proportion of White men attending church is not more than that of Negro men attending church. Consequently, it seems to be clear that church attendance among Negroes represents what is normal as far as American life is concerned.

The difference between the Blacks and the Whites in their religious expression is largely at the point of emphases, and to this we shall now turn our attention.

**The Message of the Black Church**

The effectiveness of the Black church is due in large measure to the message preached by the ministers. It has been seen already that for a long time the predominant characteristic of this message was its otherworldliness. It was also largely fundamentalist. The literal interpretation of the Bible was stressed, and the faith of the people was founded on the assurances of the Scriptures, which were held to be infallible.

More recently, however, there has been a notable shift of emphases in the messages of the Black ministers. Increasing attention has been given to the relation of religion to the pressing issues of the day. Economic, political, and other social issues have been interpreted in terms of the relevance of the Christian religion to them. The Negro minister has given increasing attention to what has been called the "social gospel." He, unlike his White fellow ministers, has been free to do this. When the White minister makes this emphasis, he is subject to criticism and censure by certain members of his congregation. Indeed, in the decades of the 'fifties and the 'sixties, a number of White ministers have been forced out of their churches because of their liberal stand

on the social aspects of the Gospel, and particularly those aspects pertaining to the race problem.\textsuperscript{28}

In any case, the Black minister has through his sermons brought consolation, encouragement, hope, and renewal to his people. He has also brought a new sense of significance and of personal worth. The people have been made to feel that, despite the deprivations they undergo in their day-to-day experience, God is indeed a just God; and he is a God who is no respecter of persons—a God of love, who, in the final resolution of all things, will see that justice prevails.

With the rise of what has been called “The Black Power Revolution,” a new emphasis is also to be noted in the message of the Black church. This is the emphasis upon “Black Power” and “Black Theology.” The term “Black Power” first came to prominence around 1967. It has a variety of interpretations. At first it was feared that the term represented a call to violence against the White man. This, however, has been denied by Adam Clayton Powell and Stokely Carmichael, who were among the first to popularize the term. In general, Black Power is interpreted to mean the development of a sense of racial identity and solidarity by Black people in order that they may more effectively achieve their goals in America. Broadly understood, Black Power is to be equated with the kind of mutual cooperation and support which all minority groups, ethnic or religious, have practiced in this country. The difference is that these groups have not publicized their “Irish Power,” or “Catholic Power,” or whatever.

An increasing number of Black ministers are identifying with this concept. This is especially true among the younger ones. They are activists in the current civil rights movement, they are leaders in social protest and in all things that pertain to the welfare of the Black community, they stress the importance of Black people uniting in order to resolve the problems they face on account of race.

Noteworthy at the current time is an emphasis upon what is called Black Theology, a term used to express the need, some Black theologists feel, for the Christian faith to be reinterpreted in terms commensurate with Black experience. There are those

\textsuperscript{28} Reimers, \textit{op. cit.}, 171.
who maintain that, as traditionally interpreted and expressed, Christianity is to be understood largely as a religion of the privileged Whites. These Black theologians feel that not enough emphasis has been placed upon the particular aspects of the Judaeo-Christian heritage which make it possible for Black people to feel that they are a significant part of the historic tradition. They feel that Black people have been striving too long to adopt White middle-class values and have failed to see that the message of the Judaeo-Christian tradition may be applied specifically to their experience.

The Black Theology movement began as early as the 'twenties, when Marcus Garvey, the dynamic leader who promoted for a number of years the "Back-to-Africa" movement, criticized White Christians and White Christianity and said that Negroes ought to think of God and Christ as being Black. Garvey emphasized Black Pride, and through his Universal Negro Improvement Associations, he constantly urged Black people to be proud of their African heritage. In 1924, at the 4th International Convention of the Negro Peoples of the World, the leaders of Garvey's new Black religion were urging the worship of a Negro Christ. Garvey's movement declined and died after he was deported to Jamaica. The remnants of his movement, however, eventually formed into what is now called the Black Muslim Movement, the head of which is Elijah Muhammed, and which is said now to have more than 100,000 members.

The Black Muslim Movement goes to the extremes in this emphasis upon Black pride. Among other things, they maintain that Negroes have been brainwashed out of their appreciation of their Black heritage, and that what is needed for the Black people to learn this heritage is to substitute Black as an ideal over against White. They advocate complete separation of Blacks from Whites. The late Malcolm X was well known for his effective interpretation of this movement. It was not until he made his memorable trip to Mecca that his attitude towards Whites was changed and he broke with the Black Muslim Movement. It was perhaps as a result of this that he was eventually assassinated.

An illustration of the Black Theology concept is to be seen in the work of Rev. Albert B. Cleage, Jr., who renamed his Central
United Church of Christ "The Shrine of the Black Madonna." In his church, he has a painting of Jesus portrayed as a Black man. There are other instances in which artists have portrayed Jesus as Black.

In summary, it can be seen that the term Black Theology is the protest against the hypocrisy of certain White Christians who have failed to recognize, either in their preachments or in their actions, the relation of the Christian Gospel to the needs of the Black community. Recent studies have indicated that members of Christian churches tend to show much more racial prejudice than non-members. To the extent that the preachments of the dominant White group in America have emphasized or supported racial or class exclusiveness, a need for calling attention to this omission is easily recognized.

Negro clergymen have held several conferences dealing with the topic of Black Theology. The eventual statement of what the term means is yet to be established. It is clear, however, that if this term represents a deliberate distortion of Christian and Jewish history, it is unfortunate. At the same time, if it represents a substitution of one racism for another, it is obviously indefensible.

Black clergymen are organizing for increased understanding and cooperation among themselves in promoting the new movement toward Black awareness. The Fellowship of Black Churchmen is perhaps the major organization giving attention to this particular kind of expression. In 1966, meeting at the Statue of Liberty, they gave an extended statement representing their opinions with regard to some of the important issues at the time. Among other things, they said:

As Black men who were long ago forced out of the white church to create and wield "black power," we fail to understand the emotional quality of the outcry of some clergy against the use of the term today. It is not enough to answer that "integration" is the solution. For it is precisely the nature of the operation of power under some forms of integration which is being challenged . . . We understand the growing demand of Negro and White youth for a more honest kind of integration; one which increases rather than decreases the capacity of the dispossessed to participate with power in all of the structures of our common life. Without this capacity to participate with power —
i.e., to have some organized political and economic strength to really influence people with whom one interacts — integration is not meaningful. For the issue is not one of racial balance but of honest interracial interactions. For this kind of interaction to take place, all people need power, whether Black or White.29

Another aspect of the contemporary Black church is the formation of Black caucuses within the predominantly White church organizations. At every recent meeting of a predominantly White group, Negro members have met by themselves to formulate certain demands. These demands deal largely with the desire on the part of the Black churchmen to have a more significant and meaningful voice in establishing church policy and in administering church programs. It is clear from published accounts of these confrontations that some changes have been and are now being made in the structure of the predominantly White church. This protest is extended to Negro students in theological schools. In several instances Black students, with the cooperation of many of their White fellow students, have conducted demonstrations demanding, among other things, more Negro representation on boards of trustees, more Black members of the faculties, and more emphasis upon studies dealing with the Black experience. As a result of these demonstrations, the theological seminaries involved have generally instituted changes to implement some of the demands of Black students.

The most recent and striking activity on the part of one organization of Black people is the demand for "reparations" from White religious organizations. This development came from the recently organized National Black Economic Development Conference, which demanded that "White Christian churches and Jewish synagogues pay $500,000,000 in 'reparations' to U. S. Negroes or face the possibility of disruption of church organizations and seizure of church facilities." The leader of this group, James Foreman, has carried out the threat in disrupting the services of two or three outstanding churches.30 Foreman's organization grew out of a liberal interfaith group, the Interreligious

Foundation for Community Organization. It was not their intention that this new organization be formed, but in spite of this, the famous "Black Manifesto" was drawn up. It is safe to say that the majority of Black clergymen are opposed to the idea of "reparations." Some White churchmen, however, have considered the demand seriously and have arranged to contribute a much more than usual sum from their budgets to causes or organizations pertaining particularly to the Black community.

Finally, attention should be drawn to the fact that the Black church has produced many outstanding preachers, religious leaders, and orators. Some years ago, *Life* magazine published a list of the 12 outstanding clergymen in America. Included in this list was Dr. Howard Thurman, then Dean of Marsh Chapel of Boston University. Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, President Emeritus of Morehouse College, and Dr. Mordecai Johnson, President Emeritus of Howard University, are examples of outstanding Black clergymen who have exerted a tremendous impact upon American life.

**Summary and Conclusion**

In this paper, we have sketched the rise and development of the Black church and indicated something of its present status. We have shown that the Black church represents the primary institution by which its constituents were able to realize a sense of community or of social cohesion and at the same time find therein resources of spiritual and moral strength which made it possible for them to survive in a hostile world.

From the Black church has come the leadership of the Black community as well as many of the organizations within which Black people are able to exercise their talents and their abilities to lead. We have seen that in some instances the Black church did not relate itself to the basic economic and political needs of the people, but that in general it has sponsored programs and has been the matrix from which individuals have sprung to carry on the fight for social justice within the context of the Judaeo-Christian heritage and the ideals of American democracy.

Now, as in the past, the Black church continues to be the
primary institution of the Black community. In these times, characterized by social upheaval, the Black church is functioning as a "power institution" and is providing essential leadership for the Black community in its endeavor to achieve the realization of their goals as first-class citizens.

Some years ago, the noted historian Arnold Toynbee asserted that it is likely that a revitalization of Christianity, if it comes at all, will come as a result of the religion of the Black people.31 Certainly the Black experience has served as a means to revitalize the Black churches themselves as well as to provide for the White churches a noteworthy cause toward which they could direct their basic Christian idealism. Many clergymen and laymen, if they have given themselves to this movement, have found, for the first time, the true meaning of Christian brotherhood and Christian commitment.

It may be that the Black church will for some time stand as a center of life and of hope for its constituents and serve continually as a stimulus to the conscience of White America. Along these lines will lie the destiny and the fulfillment of the Black church.

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