

Race, Religion, Politics and the Black Church's Proclamation: The African American Church – No Longer Invisible

**Presented by
Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr.
University of KwaZulu Natal
August 24, 2015**

Seven years ago during the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference's Annual Legislative Days held in the Nation's Capitol, prominent scholars of the African-American Religious Tradition from several different disciplines (theologians, church historians, ethicists, Hebrew Bible, New Testament, Homiletics, Hermeneutics and historians of religion...) those scholars joined in with sociologists, psychologists, political analysts, local church pastors and denominational officials from across the ecumenical spectrum to examine the African-American Religious Experience and its historical, theological and political context.

The workshops, the panel discussions and the symposia examined in much more intricate detail this seemingly "unknown phenomenon" of the Black Church –the "Invisible Institution" that is as old as (and in many ways) is older *than* the United States of America. The African American Religious tradition is a tradition that is in some ways like Ralph Ellison's "The Invisible Man."

It has been right there in the midst of the U.S.A. experience and right there on the shores of all three Americas since the 1600's, but it was, has been and, in far too many instances still is, invisible to the dominant culture in terms of its rich history, its incredible legacy and its multiple meanings.

The Black Religious Experience is a tradition that at one point in American history was actually called "The Invisible Institution" as it was forced underground by the Black Codes which prohibited the gathering of more than two Black people without a white person being present to monitor the conversation, the content and the mood of any discourse between persons of African descent - - in this country!

Race, Religion and Politics have been a part of American history since the 1600's. The Black Codes that came into being after enslaved Africans tried to break free of chattel slavery in the 1800's (with insurrections *led* by African Christian ministers like Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner among hundreds more... and resistance against chattel slavery *fed* by African Christians like David Walker and Harriet Tubman). The Black Codes did not kill the religion of the Africans.

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

Africans just gathered out of the eyesight and earshot of those who defined them as less than human. They became, in other words, “invisible” *in* and invisible *to* the eyes of the dominant culture. They gathered to worship in brush arbors or hush arbors where the slaveholders, slave patrols and Uncle Toms “couldn’t hear nobody pray.”

From the 1700’s in North America with the founding of the first legally-recognized independent Black congregations through the end of the Civil War and the passing of the 13th and 14th Amendments to the Constitution of the United States of America, the Black Religious Experience in the U.S. was informed by, enriched by, expanded by, challenged by, shaped by and influenced by the influx of Africans from the other two Americas and the Africans brought into this country from the Caribbean.

Plus the Africans who were called “fresh Blacks” by the slave traders, those Africans who had not been through the “seasoning process” of the Middle Passage (in the Caribbean colonies) those Africans of the Sea Coast Islands off of Georgia and South Carolina... the Gullah (or the “Geechee”) people brought into the Black Religious Experience in the U.S. a “flavor” that other “seasoned” Africans could not bring.

It is those various *streams* of the Black Religious Experience in the U.S. which were addressed in summary form two days in the Nation’s Capitol in April of 2008; streams which require full courses at the university and graduate school level and could not be fully addressed in a two-day symposium, and streams which tragically remain “invisible” to a dominant culture which knows nothing about those whom Langston Hughes calls “the darker brother.”

It is all of those streams that make up this multilayered and rich tapestry of the Black Religious Experience and I was assigned the task of opening up that two-day symposium with the hope that the 2008 media attack on the Black Church just might mean that the reality of the African-American church would no longer be invisible.

It was the thinking of the Trustees of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference that *maybe* in 2008, as an honest dialogue about race in this country looked like it was beginning - - a dialogue called for by then Senator Obama and a dialogue which began in my denomination, the United Church of Christ, among 5,700 congregations - - it was the thinking and the hope that maybe *then* as that dialogue began, the religious tradition that has kept hope alive for a people struggling to survive in countless, hopeless situation - -

maybe that religious tradition would be understood, celebrated and even embraced by a nation that seems not to have noticed why eleven o'clock on Sunday morning has been called “the most segregated hour in America.” (The result of Race, Religion and Politics in the Black Atlantic)

African Americans have known since 1787 that 11:00 o'clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour. It was the hope of the Board of Trustees of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference that *Maybe* seven years ago we could begin to understand *why* it is the most segregated hour; and maybe after that Conference we could begin to take steps to move the Black Religious Tradition from the status of “invisible” to the status of *invaluable*, not just for some Black people in the U.S.A., but for *all* the people in the U.S.A.!

Maybe this dialogue on race that was *supposed* to begin- - an honest dialogue that does not engage in denial or superficial platitudes - - maybe this dialogue on race could move the people of faith in the U.S.A. from various stages of alienation and marginalization to the exciting possibility of reconciliation.

That was my hope as I tackled my assignment of opening up that two-day symposium and I opened it as a pastor and a professor who comes from a long tradition of what is called the prophetic theology of the Black Church.

In the 1960's the term “Liberation Theology” began to gain currency with the writings and the teachings of preachers, pastors, priests and professors from Latin America. Their theology (as you know) was done “from the underside!”

Their viewpoint was not from the top down *nor* from the set of teachings which undergirded (and undergirds) Empire – or imperialism. Their viewpoints, rather, were from the bottom up. The thoughts and understandings of God, the faith, religion and the Bible were the thoughts of those whose lives were ground under, mangled, marginalized and destroyed by the ruling classes or the oppressors.

Liberation Theology started *in* and *from* a different place. It started from the vantage point of the oppressed. I want to focus on just three aspects of that tradition – *my* tradition – in our time together today.

I. A Theology of Liberation

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

I wrote him a personal note after the publication of his powerful book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* and I told him that was the best of all of his 14 or 15 books! You have to put that on your personal reading lists if you want to understand Race, Religion Politics and the Black Church's Proclamation in 2013.

I call our faith tradition, however, "The Prophetic Tradition of the Black Church" because I trace its origins back *past* Jim Cone, *past* the sermons and songs of Africans in bondage in the Transatlantic Slave Trade or the European Slave Trade as L.H. Whelchel cautions us to call it. I trace its origins past the problem of Western ideology of and Eurocentric notions of white supremacy. I trace the theology of the Black Church back to the prophets in the Hebrew Bible and to its last prophet (in my tradition), the One we call Jesus of Nazareth.

The prophetic tradition of the Black Church has its roots in Isaiah 61 where God says the prophet is to preach the Gospel to the poor and to set at *liberty* those who are held captive. Liberating the captives also liberates those who are holding them captive. It frees the captives and it frees the captors. It frees the oppressed and it frees the oppressor.

One cannot talk about Race, Religion, Politics and the Black Church's Proclamation without taking seriously what Jerome Ross, Curtiss DeYoung, Mitri Raheb and Allan Boesak *stress* about the faith we share. Oppressors and living under oppression are the warp and woof of the biblical faith tradition. Every word in our bibles was written under one of six different kinds of oppression – Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonia, Persian, Greek and Roman oppression. (As an aside, Mitri Raheb points out that for the Palestinians, the oppression did not stop with the Romans, but continued through the Byzantine, Ottoman, British and now European Israeli oppression!)

From Moses' prophetic message of "Let my people go (given by God) -- a message of liberation – to Harriet Tubman's 19 prophetic trips back into the segregated south to *GET* her people free, the message of liberation has been central in our faith tradition.

The prophetic theology of the Black Church during the days of chattel slavery was a theology of liberation. It was preached to set free those who were held in bondage (spiritually, psychologically and most times physically!), and it was practiced to set the slaveholders free from the notion that they could define other human beings or confine a soul set free by the power of the Gospel.

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

The prophetic theology of the Black Church in our day is preached to set African Americans and all other Americans free from the misconceived notion that different means deficient. ***Being different does not mean one is deficient.*** It simply means one is different. (Like snowflakes and like the diversity that God loves!)

Black music is different from European and European-American music. It is not deficient. It is just different.

Black worship is different from European and European-American worship. It is not deficient. It is just different. Black preaching is different from European and European-American preaching. It is not deficient. It is just different.

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

II. A Theology of Transformation

Secondly, the prophetic theology of the Black Church is not only a theology of liberation. It is also a theology of transformation which is also rooted in Isaiah 61 - - the text from which Jesus preached in His inaugural message as recorded by Luke. When you read the entire passage from either Isaiah 61 or Luke 4 (and do not try to understand the content of the passage in the context of a sound bite like my sermons were presented by the media) what you see is God’s desire for a radical change in a social order that had gone sour. – A transformation

God's desire is for positive, meaningful and permanent change. Transformation! God does not want one people seeing themselves as superior to another people. God does not want the powerless masses, the poor, the widows, the marginalized or those underserved by the powerful few to stay locked into sick systems which treat some in the society as being "more equal" than others in that same society.

God's desire is for a positive change (transformation); *real* change - - not cosmetic change (transformation); God's desire is for *radical* change or a change that makes a permanent difference (transformation).

God's desire is for transformation, changed lives, changed minds, changed laws, changed social orders and changed hearts in a changed world. This principle of transformation is at the heart of the prophetic theology of the Black Church.

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

These two foci of liberation and transformation have not only been at the very core of the Black religious Experience – right at the nexus of Race and Religion (and politics). These two foci have *also* been at the very core of the UCC denomination in which I served for 36 years as a pastor.

The United Church of Christ has had liberation and transformation at the center of its theological perspective since its predecessor denomination, the Congregational Church of New England, came to the moral defense and paid for the legal defense of the Mende people aboard the slave ship *La Amistad*; ...since the days when the United Church of Christ fought against slavery, played an active role in the Underground Railroad and set up over 500 schools for the Africans who were freed from slavery in 1865.

And, these two foci – liberation and transformation -- remain at the core of the teachings of the United Church of Christ as it has fought against Apartheid in South Africa and fought against racism in the United States of America ever since the "union" of the four denominations which make up the United Church of Christ in 1957.

These two foci of liberation and transformation have *also* been at the very core of the congregation of Trinity United Church of Christ since it was founded in 1961; and these

foci have been the bedrock of our congregation's preaching and practice for the thirty-six years that I served as its pastor.

Our congregation took a stand against Apartheid when the government of our country was supporting the racist regime of the Afrikaaner government in South Africa. Our congregation stood in solidarity with Steve Biko and Black Consciousness movement.

Our congregation read and embraced the 1985 *Kairos Document*. Our congregation commemorated June 16th Hecor Peterson and the Soweto massacre every year when I was a pastor. Our congregation was influenced by the teachings of Bonganjalo Goba in theology and Elkin Sithole in African centered ethnomusicology in the 1970's and 1980's – before the publication of the *Kairos Document*.

Our congregation had Dr. Dwight Hopkins lecture and preach for us when he published his first book, *Black Theology U.S.A. and Black Theology U.S.A.* Our congregation read and did Bible studies on the writings of Allan Aubrey Boesak. Our congregation put a sign FREE SOUTH AFRICA in front of our church building in 1979 and did not take it down until the first free election in 1994.

Our congregation sent members as observers to that 1994 election and then our congregation engaged in study tours to South Africa almost every year from 1996 until I retired. We supported financially both Inanda Seminary here in KwaZulu Natal and the St. John Apostolic Mission Church in Gugulethu. Liberation and Transformation were at the core of our congregation for 36 years – even as we gathered each week for celebration and adoration!

Our congregation stood in solidarity with the peasants of El Salvador and Nicaragua while our government (through Oliver North and the Iran-Contra scandal) was supporting the *Contras* who were killing the peasants and the Miskito Indians in those two countries.

Our congregation sent fifty two men and women (on my watch) through accredited seminaries to earn their Master of Divinity degrees (with an additional twenty being enrolled in seminary when I retired), while building two senior citizen housing complexes and running two childcare programs for the *poor*, the unemployed and low-income parents on the Southside of Chicago for the past forty years.

When I was pastor, our congregation fed over 5,000 homeless and needy families every year while our government was cutting food stamps and spending billions fighting unjust wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and anywhere else U.S. business interests are threatened.

Our congregation has sent dozens of boys and girls to fight in the Vietnam War, the first Gulf War, the present two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the unending war against terrorism. My goddaughter's unit had just arrived in Iraq the week of that Symposium on the Prophetic Witness of the Black Church while those (that *same* week) who called me unpatriotic have used their positions of privilege to avoid military service while sending over **4,000** American boys and girls to *die* over a *lie*!

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

Our congregation has had a Prison Ministry for forty years, a Drug and Alcohol Recovery Ministry for twenty five years, a Domestic Violence Ministry for 30 years, a full-service program for senior citizens and twenty-two different ministries for the youth of our church from preschool through high school - - all proceeding from the starting point of liberation and transformation. A prophetic theology which presumes God's desire for *changed* minds, *changed* laws, *changed* social orders and *changed* hearts in a changed world.

III. A Theology of Reconciliation

The prophetic theology of the Black Church is a theology of liberation. It is a theology of transformation; and it is ultimately a theology of reconciliation. The Apostle Paul said, "*Be ye reconciled one to another even as God was in Christ reconciling the world to God's self.*" God does not desire us as children of God to be at war with each other, to see each other as either superior or inferior, to hate each other, abuse each other, misuse each other, define each other or put each other down!

God wants us reconciled one to another and that third principle in the prophetic theology of the Black Church that I want to lift up is also and has always been at the heart of the Black Church Experience in North America. When Richard Allen and Absalom Jones were dragged out of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia during the same year (1787) that the Constitution was framed in Philadelphia for daring to kneel at the Altar next to white worshippers, (Race, Religion and Politics is nothing new)...they

founded the Free African Society and they welcomed white members into that organization to show that **reconciliation** was the goal - - not retaliation.

Absalom Jones became the Rector of St. Thomas Anglican Church in 1791 and St. Thomas welcomed white Anglicans in a spirit of reconciliation. Richard Allen became the Founding Pastor of the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1792 and the model of the A.M.E. church has always been, “*God Our Father, Man Our Brother and Christ Our Redeemer!*” The word “man” is sexist but in the context of the 1790’s it included men **and** women of all races in the spirit of reconciliation.

The Black Church’s role in the fight for equality and justice from the 1700’s up until 2015 has always had at its core the non-negotiable doctrine of reconciliation - - children of God *repenting* for past sins against each other and being *reconciled* to one another because of the love of God who made them all in God’s image.

Allan Boesak and Curtiss DeYoung’s book, ***Radical Reconciliation*** is a must read also for those who wrestle with Race and Religion and Politics. They use the term “Radical” because they argue that unless reconciliation goes to the *ROOT* of the racial problem, then our use of the term and our understandings are only superficial and far from biblical!

Reconciliation, the years have taught me, is where the hardest work is found for those of us in the Christian faith, however, because it means some critical thinking and some reexamination of faulty assumptions when using the paradigm of Dr. William Augustus Jones in his book, ***God In The Ghetto***.

Dr. Jones, in that book, argues quite accurately that one’s theology (how I see God) determines one’s anthropology (how I see humans); and one’s anthropology then determines one’s sociology (how I order my society)!

The implications from the outset are obvious. If I see God as male... if I see God as a white male... if I see God as superior - - as God *over* us and not *immanu-El* which means “God *with* us”... if I see God as mean, vengeful, authoritarian, sexist, or misogynist, then I see humans through that lens.

My theological lens shapes my anthropological lens and as a result, white males are superior. All others are inferior. And I order my society where I can worship God on Sunday morning wearing a black clergy robe and kill others on Sunday evening wearing a white Klan robe! Race, Religion and Jim Crow Politics.

I can have laws which favor whites over Blacks in America or in South Africa. I can construct a theology of Apartheid in the Afrikaaner church and a theology of white supremacy in the North American (or Germanic) church!

The implications from the outset are obvious... but then the complicated work is left to be done as you dig deeper into the constructs which tradition, habit and hermeneutics put on your plate. To say "I am a Christian" is not enough. Why?

Because the Christianity of the slaveholder is *not* the Christianity of the slave. The God to whom the slaveholders pray as they ride on the decks of the slave ship is not the God to whom the enslaved are praying as they ride beneath the decks of that same slave ship.

How we are seeing God (our theology) is not the same; and what we both mean when we say "I am a Christian" is not the same thing!

The prophetic theology of the Black Church has always seen and *still* sees all of God's children as sisters and brothers - - equals who need reconciliation... who need to be reconciled as equals in order for us to walk together into the future which God has prepared for us.

Reconciliation does not mean assimilation; nor does it mean acculturation. Reconciliation does not mean that Blacks become whites or whites become Blacks, that Hispanics become Asians or that Asians become Europeans. Reconciliation means we embrace our individual rich histories (all of them!). We retain who we are as persons of different cultures, while acknowledging that those of other cultures are not superior or inferior to us. They are just *different* from us.

We root out any teaching of superiority, inferiority, hatred or prejudice and we recognize for the first time in modern history in the West that the "other" who stands before us with a different color of skin, a different texture of hair, different music, different preaching styles and different dance moves... that *other* is one of God's children just as we are - - no better? No worse!

They are human beings. The "Other" is a human being, Prone to error and in need of forgiveness just as we are. Only when we can see others through those lenses will liberation, transformation and reconciliation become realities and cease being ever elusive ideals.

Now! What you *just* heard and all that I *just* said was my presentation at the opening of the two day Conference, the two day symposium, the two day gathering for Legislative

Days as we met to discuss the Prophetic Witness of the Black Church in its 500 year history in the Black Atlantic. We were there at that conference to investigate the nexus of Race, Religion, Politics and the Prophetic Witness of the Black Church. My presentation was focused on the “once-upon-a-time INVISIBLE INSTITUTION” BEING INVISIBLE NO MORE!

The Black Church which most of white America knew nothing about was no longer going to be invisible. That conference (we *thought!*) was going to put the Black Church front and center in the discussion – the national discussion – about Race, Religion and Politics in the Black Atlantic in general and in the United States in particular.

My paper was the first of four major papers given at the conference. The Conference was co-sponsored by the Howard University School of Divinity and a panel discussion involving the professors from HUSD from different disciplines was to complement the other three plenary presentations where papers by three highly respected Black Scholars in Religion were given.

Dr. John Kinney, Dean of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology, gave the second paper. Dr. Katie Cannon, a leading Womanist Theologian and Professor at Union Theological Seminary, gave the third presentation; and Dr Dwight Hopkins, a double PhD from Union Theological Seminary and the University of Cape Town gave the fourth presentation. I thought that the “Ralph Ellison Syndrome” of the Black Church would be ended as the Black Church would **finally** be made highly visible by those scholars and the Divinity School Panel discussion.

Such was not to be the case however. Racism, white supremacy and white arrogance won out again and silenced the story of the Black Church and its Prophetic Proclamation. Rendered it invisible once again! No media coverage was given to Drs. Kinney, Cannon or Hopkins. No discussion of their input in the dialogue about Race, Religion and Politics was offered. No mention was made of the distinguished panel of Howard University Divinity School professors; or the content of their dialogue.

In fact ...*nothing* that I just presented to you was covered by the media;... and in the 30 minute question and answer period following my 500 year summarization of the Black Religious Experience and its three broad points of Liberation, Transformation and Reconciliation...**NOT ONE QUESTION WAS ASKED OF ME BY THE MEDIA ABOUT MY PAPER AND MY CENTRAL THESIS.**

As both Dr. Martin Marty (Professor emeritus of Church History at the U of C) and Chris Hedges the public intellectual observed...the media didn't come to hear about the

prophetic witness of the Black Church. The media didn't come to my presentation to learn about the Invisible Institution or to hear my entrée into the presentations by Kinney, Cannon, Hopkins and the faculty at Howard.

The media came there to discredit me and hopefully to destroy the candidacy of the first African descended candidate for the highest office in the land who looked like he just might get the Democratic Nomination! Racism made them come there on the attack! Dr. Marty and Chris Hedges said, "White supremacy made them ignore, "diss" and in fact *trash* the religious tradition of your people, your parents, your grandparents and those who died believing that God could still make a way out of no way! In their estimate your people and your religious tradition had nothing to say to them worth hearing or worth reporting."

The ugliness of dirty politics – the same politics that legalized slavery, legalized Jim Crow, legalized the New Jim Crow and legalized the war on poor blacks and browns euphemistically called the "war on drugs" – those same dirty politics once again rendered the Black Church in America Invisible and not worthy of serious consideration!

The *messiness* of politics, however, *has* not, *does* not and *cannot* silence the *message* of our God who can still "take a crooked stick and hit a straight lick." That message of Liberation from Exodus three to 2015 remains the same.

That message of transformation from Zaccheus in Luke 19 to Governor Wallace in the 1970's and that message of Reconciliation from Jacob and Esau to Archbishop Tutu and Chief Albert Luthuli...that message remains the same!

That message has been the central core of the Black Church's prophetic utterance since the first Africans "stole away" to freedom or "stole away" to worship; and that proclamation is what I challenge you today to embrace in your own context as your own and to embrace as God's desire for all of God's children.

In Zulu I say Siyabonga. And in English? I say "Thank you for listening."