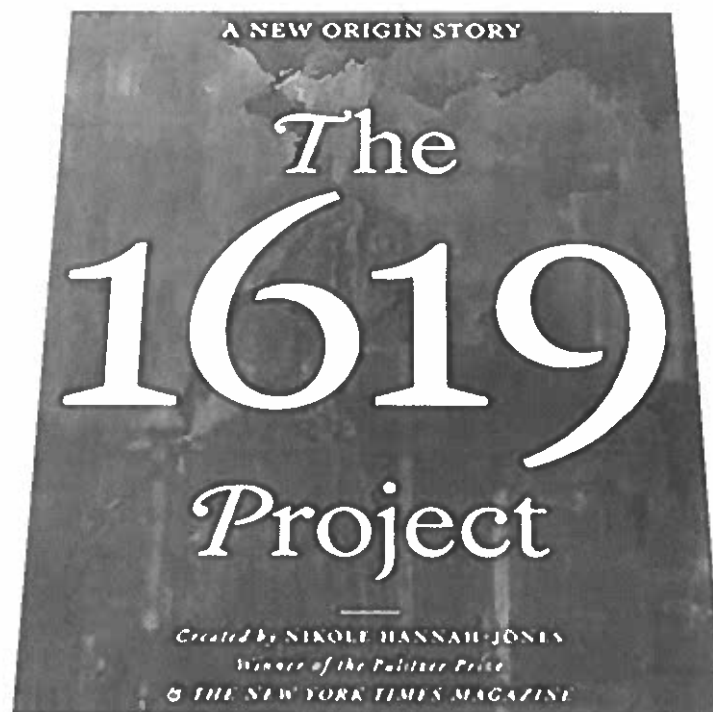


# 1619 Project Discussion Article Packet



**A New Origin Story Part 10:**

**Religion and the Civil Rights Movement**

**January 12, 2023**

**6:30 – 8:00 PM**

**Zoom ID: 823 648 5349 | Password: 691353**

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By JULIA KIRK BLACKWELDER

## Southern White Fundamentalists and the Civil Rights Movement

WITHIN MONTHS after the *Brown versus Board of Education* decision in 1954, *Christian Life*, a widely circulated evangelical publication, reported that "Since the Supreme Court's verdict against racial segregation in schools, America's churches have realized that the thorny problem of discrimination cannot be avoided."<sup>1</sup> The *Brown* ruling did trigger extensive and divisive discussions of racial issues within many Protestant denominations, but the smaller Protestant sects passed through the years of the civil rights revolution with little dissension or disharmony. Within the South, predominantly white denominations whose membership was heavily but not exclusively fundamentalist were deeply divided on racial issues beginning in the 1950s. Smaller and wholly fundamentalist sects felt the impact of the civil rights movement later and much less intensely.

During the 1950s the Southern Presbyterian Church faced a critical struggle over denominational desegregation with fundamentalists leading the segregationist forces. In contrast, two largely white fundamentalist sects, the Church of God, headquartered in Cleveland, Tennessee, and the Assemblies of God with central offices in Springfield, Missouri, did not confront racial issues until the 1960s, and the absence of a vocal desegregationist element among them was matched by an absence of segregationist rhetoric. Among Presbyterians the controversy over church desegregation spread to the larger issues of the civil rights movement while Southern fundamentalist sects rarely addressed secular civil rights questions.

The 1954 General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian Church adopted a resolution that all racial divisions within the Church should be abolished and touched off more than a decade of infighting over racial issues. Coming on the heels of the Supreme Court's verdict on segregated schools, the Assembly's mandate encouraged segregationist Presbyterians to mount a single campaign on the issues of church and school. During the years of racial controversy some white congregations voted to dissociate themselves from the Church, but a larger number chose to remain within it while resisting denominational pressures for desegregation.

During the 1950s the *Southern Presbyterian Journal* became a forum for resistance to desegregation. *Southern Presbyterian Journal* was founded in the 1940s to promote fundamentalist theology within the

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<sup>1</sup> *Christian Life*, XVI (December, 1964), 36.

Southern White Fundamentalists and the Civil Rights Movement

Author(s): Julia Kirk Blackwelder

Source: *Phylon* (1960-), 4th Qtr., 1979, Vol. 40, No. 4 (4th Qtr., 1979), pp. 334-341

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Southern Presbyterian Church and to protest the Church's membership in the National Council of Churches. Journal founder L. Nelson Bell maintained that Christians might in good conscience refuse to comply with desegregation, writing that although some Christians accepted integration "There are others — and they are as Christian in their thinking and practice as any in this world — who believe that it is un-Christian, unrealistic and utterly foolish to *force* those barriers of race which have been established by God and which when destroyed by man are destroyed to his own loss."<sup>2</sup>

Bell's rationale for considering segregation nondiscriminatory, and his basis for claims that he was not a segregationist, was a narrow distinction he drew between "forced" segregation and "forced" integration which he opposed and "voluntary" segregation and integration which he supported. In attacking "forced" segregation Bell wrote, "To abolish laws which discriminate against any citizen is something which we believe Christians should work for."<sup>3</sup> He related an incident in which four blacks were required to eat behind a partition in an Atlanta airport restaurant in compliance to Georgia segregation laws. The episode was presented in illustration of involuntary segregation, but voluntary segregation was neither illustrated nor clearly explained. Bell stated that "many Negro leaders are keenly aware of the problems brought about by desegregation and largely prefer that alignments continue on a voluntary basis."<sup>4</sup> Bell did not identify any black leaders who assumed this posture.

In 1957 *Southern Presbyterian Journal* adopted "voluntary segregation" as its official policy, its Board of Directors declaring such an arrangement to be "for the highest interest of both races."<sup>5</sup> An indication that segregation did not function voluntarily among some Southern Presbyterians was a policy statement adopted by the Board of Trustees of the Presbyterian Retreat Center at Montreat, North Carolina. The Board agreed that "Negro adults be entertained in the Fellowship Hall and Cafeteria but that Negro delegates in Young People's Leadership School could not be entertained."<sup>6</sup> Both black adults and black young people were denied use of the center's lodging facilities. The segregation position, first drawn in 1950, was reaffirmed following the 1954 General Assembly desegregation resolution. L. Nelson Bell and some other *Journal* staff served on the Montreat Board of Trustees or owned private cottages surrounding the retreat complex. Following criticisms of the Board's policy statement in *Presbyterian Outlook*, the *Journal* defended

<sup>2</sup> "Christian Race Relations Must Be Natural, Not Forced," *Southern Presbyterian Journal*, XIV (August 17, 1955), 4. In 1959 *Southern Presbyterian Journal* shortened its title to *Presbyterian Journal*.

<sup>3</sup> "Some Needed Distinctions," *Southern Presbyterian Journal*, XVI (June 5, 1957), 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Eternity*, VII (October, 1957), 16.

<sup>6</sup> *Southern Presbyterian Journal*, XIII (August 17, 1954), 4.

the action, declaring "We believe that the Trustees of Montreat have been eminently Christian in their viewpoint and action."<sup>7</sup>

During the 1950s and 1960s the *Journal* criticized the National Council of Churches and the Southern Presbyterian Church for their support of desegregation of the church and the larger society. The *Journal* published resolutions adopted by individual Presbyterian churches declaring their intentions of remaining segregated despite General Assembly policy. Beginning in 1957 the *Journal* carried segregationist articles which were less temperate than Bell's statements. In one such essay Mississippi clergyman G. T. Gillespie wrote that "to many of us this sweeping decision of the highest court in virtually taking over the control and regulation of the schools of the nation seems to be a clear violation of the Constitution itself. . . ."<sup>8</sup> Gillespie's writings, which have been much publicized by both the apologists and opponents of segregation, also charged that the Supreme Court had rendered its verdict on improper evidence prepared by Communist and socialist sympathizers. Gillespie urged Americans to launch a massive drive for reversal of the decision. Another article in the *Journal* similarly appealed to a conspiratorial view of the rights movement, asking "If the NAACP is not Communist why do Communists publicly approve every NAACP action?"<sup>9</sup>

As the civil rights movement grew more militant during the 1960s, the focus of white resistance shifted from rationalizations for maintaining segregation to criticism of civil disobedience. An article in the *Journal* acknowledged the theoretical validity of civil disobedience if civil law were in conflict with God's law. However, the article concluded that "In our present situation and under our present laws and even in spite of the fact that they may at times be unjustly administered, it does not seem likely that any case of civil disobedience is justified."<sup>10</sup>

The *Journal's* condemnation of civil disobedience was inconsistent with its earlier resistance to compliance with desegregation orders. A Bible study lesson in the *Journal* attempted to resolve the conflict with the familiar assertion that the Supreme Court had exceeded its powers in rendering the 1954 verdict because the decision was actually a form of legislation and because public schooling is a state and not a federal responsibility. The lesson advised readers that "Many Christians, therefore, in resisting the Decision, do so on the basis of sound principles."<sup>11</sup>

Unlike the Southern Presbyterian Church, the Church of God and the Assemblies of God did not directly confront racial issues until the 1960s. When the editor of the Church of God's monthly journal, the *Church*

<sup>7</sup> L. Nelson Bell, *Southern Presbyterian Journal*, XIII (September 15, 1954), 3.

<sup>8</sup> G. T. Gillespie, "A Southern Christian Looks at the Race Issue," *Southern Presbyterian Journal*, XVI (June 5, 1957), 7-8.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph S. Jones, "The Ku Klux Klan, the NAACP, and the Presbyterian Church," *Southern Presbyterian Journal*, XVI (July 31, 1957), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Samuel T. Harris, Jr., "The Problem of Civil Disobedience," *Presbyterian Journal*, XXVI (December 6, 1967), 10.

<sup>11</sup> Morton H. Smith, "Bible Study for Circle Bible Leadership on 'Jesus and Citizenship,'" *Southern Presbyterian Journal*, XVI (July 3, 1957), 21.

of *God Evangel*, was questioned in 1957 as to the position of the Church on segregation, he replied:

No formal position has ever been made concerning it. None to my knowledge has ever been needed, for the relationship between the races is respectful, dignified and brotherly in the Church of God. The colored work of the Church is a vital part of it, with equal rights and requirements. In our recent General Assembly (as in all of them) there were delegates of many races present, and participation by all on the program. Yet there is no untoward fraternization between our members of different races.<sup>12</sup>

Segregation within the Church of God had been reinforced through the 1927 incorporation of black churches into a separate conference and the establishment of an office to handle church programs for blacks and evangelization among blacks. The Church has issued a monthly denominational publication, *Church of God Gospel Herald*, specifically for black members. Until 1959 blacks were not served by Lee College, the sect's educational facility in Cleveland, Tennessee. When the first Bible institute for blacks was held, it consisted of a four-week course conducted by Lee College instructors at rented quarters in Jacksonville, Florida. Despite the Church's emphasis on evangelizing blacks, no full-term education for blacks was offered during the 1960s.

During the 1960s the Church of God began to react to the civil rights movement. At its 1964 General Assembly the Church passed a "Human Rights" declaration. While affirming the concept of equal constitutional rights for all citizens and stating that "no Christian can manifest a passive attitude when the rights of others are jeopardized,"<sup>13</sup> the resolution was not a desegregation mandate and reference to segregation or other specific civil rights issues was avoided. The Church continued its policy of maintaining a separate administrative office to serve blacks although black churches were no longer segregated into a separate conference after 1965.

The Assemblies of God, like the Church of God, was able to avoid sect-wide confrontation of racial issues during the 1950s. Although fundamentalist sects were slow to confront racism within the church, it is apparent that church members were concerned about racial issues. Readers of fundamentalist publications frequently expressed interest in the racial identity of biblical characters. A subscriber to *Pentecostal Evangel*, official voice of the Assemblies of God, expressed concern over attempts by some black Christians to teach that Jesus was black. An *Evangel* staff member responded that "Jesus was a Jew as to his humanity, a descendant of David." Regarding the origin of the black race, the *Evangel* stated, "it is probable that the Negroes descended from Ham. But we must remember that various nations descended from Ham." In

<sup>12</sup> *Church of God Evangel*, XLVII (January 21, 1957), 15.

<sup>13</sup> *Church of God Evangel*, LIV (August 31, 1964), 34.

answer to a similar inquiry James A. Cross of the *Church of God Evangel* wrote that "the sons of Ham comprise the nations of Ethiopia, Canaan, the Arabian Coast, and the interior of Africa." Although the reader asked specifically about the "Negro and different colored races," Cross confined his statement to the matter of nationality, also citing the confusion of Tongues at the Tower of Babel as a genesis of national differences.<sup>14</sup>

As civil rights advocates grew more militant during the 1960s, fundamentalist journals which had kept silent on racial issues began to speak out. The Church of God and the Assemblies of God refrained from direct attacks on civil rights leaders, focusing instead on the method of civil disobedience. An article in the *Church of God Evangel* warned that America was plagued by a "senseless lack of obedience under authority," and that the wrongdoing would not go unpunished. The article maintained that "he who sets himself up against authorities resists what God himself appointed and arranged in divine order." A similar message in *The Pentecostal Evangel* advised: "Do Not Let the Tides of Violence Sweep You Away from God."<sup>15</sup>

White Southern fundamentalists had shown little concern over the violence of whites against civil rights demonstrators in the early sixties, but they expressed fear and outrage over the seizure and destruction of property during the ghetto riots of 1967 and 1968. After the tumultuous summer of 1967 one Pentecostalist wrote that the eschaton seemed near: "The marauding Red Guard of Communist China, the mobs of Britain, the rioters and looters in the states of our own troubled nation all add up to a significant sign of the end of time." The editor of *Pentecostal Evangel* proposed that emphasis on a Christianity which directs the "haves" to share with the "have-nots" coupled with equal enforcement of laws among landlords as well as tenants was a reasonable solution to ghetto violence; however, he endorsed the 1968 anti-crime bill as a preliminary step.<sup>16</sup>

Ray H. Hughes, Assistant General Overseer of the Church of God responded to ghetto unrest with the rhetoric of nineteenth-century Protestant conservatives. Hughes wrote that

Evangelical and Protestant churches have abandoned the inner city and made their exodus to suburbia, leaving the inner city with a Protestant minority, an influence of Jewish values, a controlling Catholic element, and restless ethnic groups and fevered cults. This exodus to suburbia is largely responsible for the crime and unrest in the cities.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ernest S. Williams, "Your Questions Answered," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, no. 2837 (September 22, 1968), 9; "Answers from the Word," *Church of God Evangel*, LVII (March 27, 1967), 15.

<sup>15</sup> Arthur H. Townsend, "Obedient Under Authority," *Church of God Evangel*, LV (June 28, 1965), 7; *The Pentecostal Evangel*, no. 2834 (September 1, 1968), 8.

<sup>16</sup> C. M. Ward, "Signs of the End of Time," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, no. 2788 (October 15, 1967), 6; Robert C. Cunningham, editorial, *ibid.*, no. 1779 (August 13, 1967), 4; "Iniquity Abounding," *ibid.*, no. 2827 (July 14, 1968), 5.

<sup>17</sup> "To the Inner City," *Church of God Evangel*, LVIII (February 24, 1969), 13.

Not all fundamentalists shared Hughes's simplistic interpretation of urban problems and few demonstrated such intense religious intolerance, but all fundamentalists accept evangelical Christianity as the only cure for social problems. This conviction militated against fundamentalist support of the civil rights movement and the anti-poverty legislation of the 1960s.

An Atlanta pastor's comments after the assassination of Martin Luther King further illustrate the manner in which fundamentalist theology discouraged affirmation of the civil rights movement. The clergyman wrote that he had disapproved of King's activities, but that he felt compelled to attend the King funeral in protest against his murder. As a minister of the Assemblies of God he had always repudiated civil disobedience because he "knew the scriptures stated that we were to submit to our rulers." He came away from the funeral with his opposition to civil disobedience unaltered but with a new sense of the injustice suffered by black Americans. He advised fellow members of the Assemblies that "While we deplore the violence that racial unrest has brought to our land, we who know the Lord and his Word must recognize that the spreading revolution and lawlessness are part of a divine judgment. Sins of omission are just as serious as sins of commission." However, he concluded that evangelization of blacks was the answer to contemporary problems, asserting that "Civil rights legislation cannot, I believe, meet the basic needs of the ghettos, but the gospel can."<sup>18</sup>

The position of black fundamentalists on civil rights has differed from that of white evangelicals, but they have also refrained from civil rights activism. Evangelist Robert E. Harrison of the Assemblies of God made the following statement at a church convocation:

Jesus said, "These things shall be." "Race shall rise against race." This is one of the clear signs of the times.

As born-again believers we must never allow these signs to desensitize us from Christ's commission to make disciples of all nations. . . .

Speaking as an American Christian who also happens to be a "man of color," I cannot help but emphasize that although political and economic pressure can help curb the racial problem, only Christ and His gospel can solve it.

Harrison, like other black fundamentalists, recognized the necessity of civil rights measures as an expediency and he was critical of racial discrimination within evangelical churches. Harrison advised fellow church members that racial prejudices within American Protestantism were turning blacks in America and elsewhere away from Christianity, but he affirmed his conviction that "Salvation is in a Person, Jesus Christ. Neither the evils of American society, nor the failings of some

<sup>18</sup> L. Calvin Bacon, "Eyewitness at a Funeral," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, no. 2827 (July 14, 1968), 20-21.



Christians can change this fact or reduce the individual's responsibility to accept and serve Him as Saviour and Lord."<sup>19</sup>

As the emphasis on black separatism increased and as blacks became increasingly skeptical of white churches, fundamentalists stepped up their efforts to evangelize blacks but recognized the necessity of training blacks to evangelize their own people. As an Assembly of God clergyman wrote, "Perhaps the day is past when whites can minister directly to blacks. They tend to distrust the whites because of the way they have been exploited by them. But if we whites cannot minister directly to the American Negroes, surely we can support qualified Negro ministers who will provide some of the spiritual leadership they so desperately need in this hour of crisis."<sup>20</sup> The Assemblies already had taken some action in this direction. In 1967 the sect announced that it would open a revival center in Harlem where blacks could minister to the community.<sup>21</sup>

The Church of God is both smaller and less urban than the Assemblies of God. It also has churches outside the South, but it was less disturbed by black separatism and by criticism of racism within the church. If there have been racial tensions within the Church of God, they have been minimized in the *Church of God Evangel*, which, indeed, has consistently emphasized the spirit of brotherhood attending integrated gatherings of the Church's General Assembly. Furthermore, the Church of God did adopt a resolution declaring its support of equal rights for all citizens while no such declaration was forthcoming from the Assemblies of God. But although neither the Assemblies of God nor the Church of God demonstrated the ardent segregationist spirit of dissident Presbyterians, all three groups rejected civil disobedience.

Southern white fundamentalist sects like the Church of God and the Assemblies of God may have been able to skirt the segregation issue partly because they were not targets for the civil rights movement as were older and larger Protestant denominations. The larger denominations have a wider national recognition than the fundamentalist sects. They represent a larger share of the church population and control more property in the urban South than do fundamentalist sects. When civil rights workers prayed on the steps of Protestant churches throughout the South, they chose Methodist, Presbyterian, and Southern Baptist houses of worship and passed by Primitive Baptist, Church of God, and Assemblies of God sanctuaries.

The membership of the Southern Presbyterian Church in the National Council of Churches (NCC) was an additional impetus toward desegregation. The NCC had criticized segregation as early as 1946.

<sup>19</sup> Robert E. Harrison, "These Things Shall Be," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, no. 2789 (October 23, 1967), 2.

<sup>20</sup> L. Calvin Bacon, "Eye Witness at a Funeral," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, no. 2827 (July 14, 1967), 2.

<sup>21</sup> *The Pentecostal Evangel*, no. 2766 (May 12, 1967), 10.

**Racism and Religion:  
The Contrasting Views of Benjamin Mays, Malcolm X,  
and Martin Luther King, Jr.**

Roger D. Hatch

Through two centuries of American life, some classic lines of reasoning have developed about racism and its relation to religion. Benjamin E. Mays, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. well represent the three most important arguments: (1) a basic acceptance of the ideals of white American culture and an attempt to bring black reality into line with them, (2) a basic rejection of white American cultural ideals and an attempt by blacks to substitute a new set of values, and (3) a call for the transformation of American culture by carefully pursuing the best of both black and white values. In comparing these positions we shall examine three specific areas of thought: the authors' definitions of the nature of racism; their concrete visions of a changed and just society; and their different formulas for achieving this ideal society.

**Benjamin E. Mays**

**THE NATURE OF RACISM**

Benjamin Mays' earliest memory is that of a white mob in Georgia assembled to lynch a black man. As a child, he observed that this is a white man's world. He wondered how he could be free to grow to his full stature as a man. Looking back, he writes: "All my life the race problem had been as close as the beating of my heart, circumscribing my thoughts, my actions, my feelings."<sup>1</sup> "Racism" is the problem, and "segregation" is the way racism has become institutionalized in America. Mays outlines the basic ways this segregated system operates, a system that denies rights to black people:

Not only in major areas—the right to vote, the right to economic security, the right to education, the right to decent housing—was the Negro deprived. But these basic denials proliferated also in

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel* (New York, Scribner's, 1971), p. 149.

countless ways to guarantee that every Negro should be consistently subjected to humiliating injustices and insults calculated to destroy his self-respect, his pride, and his sense of manhood <sup>2</sup>

In addition, he is aware of the danger that Americans might accept such a segregated system as being natural or right. Observing the scene in Atlanta in 1921, Mays wrote "Segregation was god—the absolute—and was worshipped not only in secular life but in the 'House of God.' On his altars were sacrificed the bodies, minds, and very souls of Negro men and women and little children."<sup>3</sup> In addition, Mays notes that discrimination damages the person who practices it as well as the person who is discriminated against. He recognizes the gap between theory and practice in racial injustice, it is hypocrisy on the part of the church and the nation to tolerate racism, in the light of the Founding Fathers' ideals.

#### VISION OF A JUST SOCIETY

Mays' goal, in terms of the American dream and Christianity, is to make the dream a reality for every American. He appeals to "those ideals to which the nation clings and the goals toward which it strives when it is at its best and thinks nobly."<sup>4</sup> Integration is the realization of an ideal. While desegregation can occur as the result of court orders and congressional legislation, integration is a spiritual term implying oneness, wholeness, identity of aims and purposes to be achieved in more profound ways. Both desegregation *and* integration are necessary. According to Mays

The central questions confronting every black man are what he can do to enlarge his freedom, to create in himself a sense of his inherent worth and dignity, and to develop economic and political security. He must also consider what can be done to help build a society where each person has the opportunity to develop his mind, body, and spirit without the imposition of artificial barriers.<sup>5</sup>

"It is not always easy for a black man to swear allegiance to the flag," he concludes, "but the American dream is embodied in that allegiance, and until it is repudiated one can still hope for and work toward the day when it becomes a reality."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* p 75

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* p 88

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* p 265

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* p 308

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* p 275

## MEANS TO ENACT THE VISION

This vision must be sought in both personal and corporate ways. On the personal level, the issue is how to live in a segregated society without accepting the limitations of that society. He concludes, "As long as a man registers some form of protest against that which is obviously wrong, he has not surrendered his freedom, and his soul is still his own."<sup>7</sup> On the corporate level, he observes that four main solutions have been advanced: colonization, segregation by law, some form of black separatism in the United States, and desegregation. A few have argued for miscegenation or violent revolution. He is critical of the latter.

I am convinced that any program designed to solve the black-white problem by providing a geographically segregated place for twenty million blacks is destined to failure. Moreover, I am convinced that any offensive, violent programs instigated by Negroes will profit little. Nor do I believe that the black man's salvation lies in the total destruction of the present social, economic, and political systems, and that on the ruins a new order of justice, freedom, and equality for all Americans will spring, full blown. The same tainted and distorted humanity that built the present systems will build the new.<sup>8</sup>

## Malcolm X

## THE NATURE OF RACISM

Malcolm's earliest recollection is strikingly similar to Mays'—he was suddenly snatched awake in frightening confusion when the Little Home was fire-bombed by two whites. His father later was murdered—probably by whites. Malcolm calls racism "the earth's most explosive and pernicious evil."<sup>9</sup> In his view, racism is not the mere denial of civil rights but the denial of *human* rights. Its effects (and perhaps its roots) are psychological, spiritual, economic, and political. At the root of racism is a fraud, a lie that black people are inferior and white people superior. The truth of the black people's role in history has been hidden by a white conspiracy handed down generation by generation, continually brainwashing blacks. But this systematic hiding of the truth has wreaked havoc on both black and white.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 196

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.* pp. 320-21

<sup>9</sup>Malcolm X (with the assistance of Alex Haley) *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Grove Press, 1964, p. 338

people, helping the "American white man to build up, deep in his psyche, the absolute conviction that he is 'superior,'" thus keeping him from seeing the truth <sup>10</sup> Malcolm viewed white people as the source of the evil of racism " They are devils " The truth of this claim is validated by the experience of nearly every black person in America "When he thinks about his own life, he is going to see where, to him, personally, the white man sure has acted like a devil " <sup>11</sup> Malcolm continues, "We are not speaking of an *individual* white man We are speaking of the *collective* white man's *historical* record We are speaking of the collective white man's cruelties, and evils, and greeds, that have seen him *act* like a devil toward the not-white man " <sup>12</sup> This change in Malcolm's thought during and after his break with Elijah Muhammad led him to revise his earlier statement "the white man is not inherently evil, but America's racist society influences him to act evilly " <sup>13</sup>

#### VISION OF A JUST SOCIETY

Malcolm's vision—one of respect for all people—never altered, although his understanding of the way in which a just society might be achieved changed dramatically

The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us that since Western society is deteriorating, it has become overrun with immorality, and God is going to judge it, and destroy it And the only way the black people caught up in this society can be saved is not to *integrate* into this corrupt society, but to *separate* from it, to a land of our *own*, where we can reform ourselves, lift up our moral standards, and try to be godly I am certain that we will be forced to agree that it takes God *Himself* to solve this grave racial dilemma <sup>14</sup>

Two of the more realistic goals are self-respect and separation

As other ethnic groups have done, let the black people wherever possible, however possible, patronize their own kind, hire their own kind, and start in those ways to build up the black race's ability to do for itself 'That's the only way the American black man is ever going to get respect' The black man never can become independent and recognized as a human being who is truly equal

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* p 274

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid* p 183

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid* p 266

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid* p 371

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid* p 246

with other human beings until he has what they have, and until he is doing for himself what others are doing for themselves.<sup>15</sup>

Malcolm distinguished clearly between separation (which he advocated) and segregation (which he abhorred). "*Segregation* is when your life and liberty are controlled, regulated by *someone else*. To *segregate* means to control. Segregation is that which is forced upon inferiors by superiors. But *separation* is that which is done voluntarily by two equals—for the good of both."<sup>16</sup> The end of Malcolm's life was characterized by brotherhood and solidarity. "I'm a human being first and foremost, and as such I'm for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a *whole*."<sup>17</sup> The basic objective of the Organization of Afro American Unity was to help create a society in which an honest black-white brotherhood could exist.

#### MEANS TO ENACT THE VISION

There are several means by which to achieve this mutual respect for all human beings: black economic solidarity, black political solidarity, separation from corrupt white society, exposing corrupt white society, spreading the truth about the true equality of blacks, personal moral self-improvement among blacks, by understanding the spiritual truth about Allah and the brotherhood of all people, and even by Allah's own involvement. For the most part, the actors in this struggle for justice are to be black Americans, although Malcolm endeavored to enlist all blacks in the struggle. Toward the end of his life, with his changed understanding of brotherhood and the solidarity of the human race, he even found a role for whites. For the most part, Malcolm gave priority to personal moral and religious activity. Such activities can help black people to overcome a lifetime of brainwashing about their inherent inferiority. It can help them to overcome exploitation by white people in such areas as drugs, and it can give them a vision of solidarity with all black people, leading them to join others in achieving self-respect and finally the respect of all other races.

#### Martin Luther King, Jr.

##### THE NATURE OF RACISM

For Martin Luther King, Jr., racism was a problem of many dimensions. "segregation is not only politically, economically, and socially un sound, it

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid* pp 275-76

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid* p 246

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid* p 366

12

is morally wrong and sinful"<sup>18</sup> King noted the close relationship between economics and racism "It is important to understand that the basis for the birth, growth, and development of slavery in America was primarily economic [Thus] men had to convince themselves that a system which was so economically profitable was morally justifiable"<sup>19</sup> Thus racism developed,

a philosophy based on a contempt for life It is the arrogant assertion that one race is the center of value and object of devotion It is the absurd dogma that one race is responsible for all the progress of history and alone can ensure the progress of the future Racism is total estrangement It separates not only bodies but minds and spirits Inevitably it descends to inflicting spiritual or physical homicide upon the out-group<sup>20</sup>

In King's view, racism "became a structural part of the [American] culture And men then embraced this philosophy, not as the rationalization of a lie, but as the expression of a final truth"<sup>21</sup> King found in America two dominant and contradictory ideologies one positive, the democratic heritage, one negative, racism, which contradicts and falls short of the democratic ideal "For the good of America, it is necessary to refute the idea that the dominant ideology in our country even today is freedom and equality while racism is just an occasional departure from the norm on the part of a few bigoted extremists"<sup>22</sup> Using George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, John Quincy Adams, John Calhoun, and Abraham Lincoln as examples, he noted "Virtually all of the Founding Fathers of our nation, those whom we cherish as our authentic heroes, were so enmeshed in the ethos of slavery and white supremacy that not one ever emerges with a clear, unambiguous stand on Negro rights."<sup>23</sup> "The situation has not changed a great deal since then," King concluded "The racism of today is real, but the democratic spirit that has always faced it is equally real"<sup>24</sup> In the final analysis, racism is wrong because it distorts the soul and damages the personality "Racism deprives man of freedom, that quality which makes him man, it cuts

<sup>18</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait*, New York: Harper & Row, 1963, p. 82

<sup>19</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here?* New York: Harper & Row, 1967, pp. 84, 85

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97

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off one's capacity to deliberate, decide, and respond, and," he continued, "it obscures the essential interrelatedness of all people."<sup>25</sup>

#### VISION OF A JUST SOCIETY

King's actions were guided by his vision of "what is best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage."<sup>26</sup> Yet at the same time he was critical of both the American political system and the church. The civil rights movement should not be thought of as something that seeks to integrate blacks into the existing value system of white American society. Instead, it should be the source of creative dissent to call America to higher values and to the fullest expression of its humanness. "The greatest blasphemy of the whole ugly process [of racism] was that the white man ended up making God his partner in the exploitation of the Negro. What greater heresy has religion known?"<sup>27</sup> According to King, the most important values in the pursuit of the American dream are brotherhood, democracy, community, freedom, and peace. Integration unites these ideals, it is based on the recognition that all of life is interrelated, "that my personality can only be fulfilled in the context of community."<sup>28</sup> In another of his essays, King wrote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."<sup>29</sup> In seeking integration, a black person not only is "winning rights for himself," he also is producing "substantial results for the nation."<sup>30</sup> If there is an ultimate solution to the race problem, King conceded that it lies in the willingness of people to obey unenforceable moral laws. "Court orders and federal enforcement agencies are of inestimable value. [as they] break down the legal barriers and bring men together physically, but something must touch the hearts and souls of men so that they will come together spiritually because it is natural and right."<sup>31</sup>

#### MEANS TO ENACT THE VISION

King held that the means to bring about this vision must be based on persuasion, and nonviolence is the ultimate form of persuasion. But he denied that ethical appeals and persuasion alone would bring about justice.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 114, 116, 118.

<sup>26</sup> King, *Why We Can't Wait*, p. 94.

<sup>27</sup> King, *Where Do We Go From Here?*, p. 88.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*. New York: Harper & Row, 1958, p. 87.

<sup>29</sup> King, *Why We Can't Wait*, p. 77.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>31</sup> King, *Where Do We Go From Here?*, p. 118.



"This does not mean that ethical appeals must not be made. It simply means that those appeals must be undergirded by some form of constructive coercive power."<sup>32</sup> "We will try to persuade with our words, but if our words fail, we will try to persuade with our acts."<sup>33</sup> King added, "I suggest this approach because I think it is the only way to reestablish the broken community."<sup>34</sup> His study of the Christian faith and the example of Mohandas Ghandi, provided the basic tenets of King's philosophy of nonviolence: (1) "It does resist", (2) "It does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent but to win his friendship and understanding", (3) "The attack is directed against the forces of evil rather than against persons who happen to be doing evil", (4) "The nonviolent resister is willing to accept violence if necessary, but never to inflict it", (5) "The nonviolent resister not only refuses to shoot his opponent but he also refuses to hate him", and (6) "It is based on the conviction that the universe is on the side of justice."<sup>35</sup> King preached that violence, as a means of achieving racial justice, is both impractical and immoral. "It is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. Violence is immoral because it destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible."<sup>36</sup>

### Conclusions

In sum, Benjamin Mays, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. view racism as a (if not the) central problem of American culture and of Christianity. Racism is, in a sense, a religious or spiritual problem, but there are other important dimensions, and there is surprising agreement among the three in identifying these other dimensions, i.e., economic, political, social, and personal/psychological. All agree that violence is inherently related to racism and that racism is a kind of false religion (Malcolm at times linked racism to a misinterpretation of the Bible and the principles of Christianity).

Interestingly, the visions toward which they were aiming are similar, if not the same. However, in Malcolm's earlier writings he denied universal brotherhood. Yet he stated toward the end of his life, "The goal has always been the same, with the approaches as different as mine and Dr. Martin Luther King's nonviolent marching."<sup>37</sup> The key words are brotherhood,

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid* p 152

<sup>33</sup> King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p 193

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid* p 196

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid* pp 83-88 *passim*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid* p 189

<sup>37</sup> Malcolm X, *Autobiography* p 377

community, freedom, justice respect for all people, democracy, peace-- and for Mays and King, integration (For Malcolm separation was the only way to achieve these goals )

The sources of these visions, however are different for each Mays' vision arises from the American dream and Christianity No matter how ephemeral these ideals may be, they are at least conceived in the image of a perfect system and Mays deemed it better to follow the shadow of the best than to remain content with the worst For Malcolm, for whom the present system is so inadequate his vision must come from the outside, in this case, from Islam King derived his vision both from within and from outside the existing American culture There is some disagreement about the appropriate means to realize such goals Both Mays and King believe in nonviolent resistance as the main tactic--although for them it is more than just a tactic, it is a principle Malcolm approves of violence, particularly in self-defense He also views separation as an appropriate tactic Mays and King view desegregation as a better means of achieving their goals Both Mays and Malcolm stress personal moral activity to gain and reaffirm self-respect For Mays, the agents of change are primarily blacks and church members, both white and black, for Malcolm, primarily black people, although later in his life, he was willing to accept help from anyone willing and able to give it (He often expressed guilt feelings about his reply to a well-meaning white student who asked what she could do to help, his often regretted reply was "Nothing ") In King's view, agents of change are blacks, liberal whites, labor, government and the churches Finally, while there are a number of appropriate means to alleviate and ameliorate the problem of racism, all agree that religion and spiritual means provide the only solution

For all three men racism has important religious dimensions, visions of what can be and of what ought to be have their source in various religious traditions The means to seek these visions are in part religious But how does each one define "religion?"

Mays key word is not religion but "church" or "Christianity " Christianity is one form of religion The purpose of religion is "to make men good " <sup>38</sup> Segregation is seen as a sort of false religion (it is false because it cannot make people good) Thus, for the most part "Christian" can be read where Mays writes "religious "

Malcolm's key word is "spiritual," which tends to mean "religious" without reference to any particular embodiment of it He often spoke of particular religions but not of "religion " He also spoke of *true* religion

<sup>38</sup>Mays *Born To Rebel* p 320

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by which he meant not only Islam but *any* truly monotheistic and universalistic religion (Christianity, in many respects, does not qualify)

King's "religion" was the generic term under which Christianity, Judaism, and Islam were all grouped. He understood white supremacy to be a false religion because it is neither final nor true. Final truth, King claimed, is brotherhood and community. He determined this by examining the many religions of mankind and noting the important things they have in common. Although King occasionally used the term "religion" to mean Christian, generally he used it to refer to those characteristics that all religions hold in common. For example, he wrote, "Whether we call it an unconscious process, an impersonal Brahman or a Personal Being of matchless power and infinite love, there is a creative force in this universe that works to bring the disconnected aspects of reality into a harmonious whole."<sup>39</sup>

For all three men, the subject of racism leads directly to a discussion of religion. Religion is a major source of vision in a just society, religious terms and arguments are employed in discussing the means to reach these visions, and religious institutions are among the key agents bringing about needed change. However, deeper reasons exist for discussing religion and racism together.

First, whether affirming or denying racism, one must define in a general and normative manner the relationship of *all* human beings to each other—in this case of equality, or inequality. This inevitably involves some understanding of religion, since religion deals with human responses of emotion and purpose growing out of an intuition about the nature of reality itself. Thus, a consideration of the legitimacy of racism inevitably involves questions about the ultimate equality or inequality of all human beings. The final appeal, it seems, is to an understanding of the nature of reality, whether or not that understanding grows out of a particular religious community. Thus, racism is intimately involved with religious values.

Second, this relationship of equality or inequality usually is justified in the ultimate terms of human fulfillment. Two arguments predominate. In the first, human beings find fulfillment in their relationship to God. The usual view is that all people are created in the image of God or are children of God, and thus are equal. Its counterpart is that only some select persons are children of God, or that some persons are children of one God, others of another God, thus, people are *not* inherently equal. In the latter views, human fulfillment is described in terms of the human being's capacity for thought and action. King, for example, wrote that freedom is the

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<sup>39</sup>King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 88

quality that makes a human being the most highly developed creature, he describes freedom as the capacity to deliberate, decide and respond. According to King, human fulfillment can be achieved only in the context of a community. Racism—its opponents correctly say—prevents human fulfillment and the promotion of human fulfillment is the principal task of religion. Racism's proponents say either that there are various kinds of human fulfillment which are different in principle (so that all people do not find fulfillment in the same way) or that some beings we usually think of as persons simply are not.

Third, the difficulty of sustained action against racism leads to questions about whether there is any kind of justice beyond this life, whether there is any meaning to American racism other than the sad results we see to date, whether action opposing racism is worth all the trouble. The only answers to these questions are religious.

Finally, the three writers agree that while there are many good and necessary tactics and areas for action, if one is considering a solution to racism rather than a temporary amelioration of the problem, one must consider the conversion from racist religion to a universalistic religion that actually practices the brotherhood it preaches. All are agreed that this conversion is something which cannot simply be legislated, cannot simply be forced on citizens, ultimately, it is achieved by persuasion, by conversion to a different vision of the universe and to a non-racist religion.

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# The Black Church's Civil Rights Movement Legacy Is Both A Blessing And A Curse, Pastors Say

 [huffpost.com/entry/black-church-civil-rights-movement\\_n\\_3810530](http://huffpost.com/entry/black-church-civil-rights-movement_n_3810530)

Danielle Cadet

August 24, 2013

For the Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III, the civil rights movement is not a period of time that only exists in history books; the movement runs deep in his veins -- literally.

With a mother who was a secretary for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and a father who was an early organizer for the movement, an active minister and regional director for the SCLC, both of whom were eventually married to each other by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. himself, Moss has deeply rooted ties to the history of social activism.

As close family friends of not only the Kings, but also other noteworthy individuals like Fannie Lou Hamer, Ralph David Abernathy and Andrew Young, Moss' parents created an environment where spirituality and social responsibility were tied to one another.

"This was a part of my development," Moss told The Huffington Post. "It was really how I became engaged not only in social justice activity, but I was nurtured and educated in a church that said that love and justice and Jesus are connected. When love and justice come together they produce a baby: first name liberation, last name transformation. That's the kind of church I grew up in."

As senior pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, a congregation heavily engaged in community activism, Moss is a product of the kind of black church that comes to mind when thinking about the historic movement that affected so much change in the United States. The sort of church where members congregated before rallies, singing gospel songs and preparing to fight injustice, with a pastor who delivered fervent and inspiring speeches against inequality. But it is that exact characterization that some say has created a mythical legacy that the present-day church is struggling to live up to.

## Reality v. Mythology

Like many African-Americans, Moss grew up believing most black churches were involved in social activism like his. However, he said that is a false assumption largely based on the glamorization of the civil rights movement.

"Many churches, black churches in particular, have proclivity for social justice. But there's only a remnant that have made that part of their mission," he said. "On one level it's bittersweet that everyone loves Dr. King and loves the Civil Rights Movement now that we can have a newseum gaze, but in the reality, for those who were participating, this was a life or death decision and it was a remnant of people."

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The Rev. Nelson Rivers, vice president of stakeholder relations of the NAACP, agreed saying the fictitious characterization of the church is a challenge to the church's present standing.

"I think one thing that affects the black church today is the mythology of the black church's involvement of yesterday," he told The Huffington Post. "There's a growing consensus that justice must be on the black church's agenda, and that was not the case even in the old days."

Rivers said clergymen like King, Abernathy and Adam Clayton Powell had in fact split from conservative leaders who distanced themselves from the movement. As a result, their names -- Dr. King's most prominently--became synonymous with the Civil Rights movement, although in reality, pastors only made up a small sect of leaders and organizers.

"That was a myth created by an exaggerated reality because of the power and personality of King. But even the first march, the majority of the leaders were not preachers," he said. "A great disservice of the movement is to summarize it in the name of one person, it was never that. Too many people paid the price, including Dr. King."

It is that exact longing for messianic leadership that many say cripple not only the church's progress but the black community's as well, and fuel criticism of present-day leaders like the Rev. Al Sharpton and the Rev. Jesse Jackson.

"I don't think a messianic leader structure is especially what we need right now," founder and senior pastor of Community of Hope A.M.E. Church in Maryland, the Rev. Tony Lee, told The Huffington Post. "If you look at the movement, it was about a whole lot more than King. The civil rights movement was about organizing on a fundamental, regular person level. The challenge right now is, we deal with people who want to be in the front of the movement but the movement has no infrastructure."

### **Bridging The Generation Gap**

Despite the glamorization of the movement, one fact remains undisputed. The black church leadership of the King era faced a very different social landscape and served a very different type of community 50 years ago, a factor that has created a gap between the older and younger generation of pastors.

Because segregation limited black people's options of where they could congregate, celebrate or even carry out business, the church was a central part of the community's survival as one of the few black-owned institutions, Moss said.

"Segregation completely changed the dynamic," he said. "The church was the epicenter for your economic, sociological and psychological community-based meetings."

In the post-civil rights era, the church's significance has shifted as African-Americans have gained access to services and opportunities they were denied before.

"Increasingly the black church is a choice, when in the past it was our only option we had left," Rivers said.

As a result, Lee said black churches have to change the way they connect with their congregations and support the modern day movement, although their message remains the same.

"Movement shifts," he said. "During that time period that kind of movement was necessary. I think that in this technological age, that understanding movement and platform might shift."

The seasoned ministers who fought injustice in the 1950s and 60s come from a world where taking initiative and working with organizations like the NAACP and the Urban League was one of the only ways to affect change across a national platform. But technology has opened up opportunities for younger pastors to gain access to communities in a way their forefathers could not, and they're waiting for the old guard to pass the torch.

"You're watching a new generation trying to find their voice and deciding to do what they have they have to do," Lee said. "You have an old guard who it wasn't handed to, and a younger generation waiting for them to hand it over, and they're looking at them like 'when are you going to take it?'"

As a second-generation pastor, Moss is familiar with bridging generation gaps. He regularly co-preaches with his father and will be delivering a sermon alongside him at the March On Washington 50th anniversary ecumenical service. He said he and his father aim to communicate the same message in a way both generations will understand, and encourages other ministers to do the same.

"Each generation has to find its own footing," he said. "But also, they need to have sages that can give them reflection about where they've been and the oral history about what needs to happen for the generation to move forward. The baton needs to be passed, but in some cases, it needs to be wrestled from the hands of those who refuse to let go."

### **On Life Support?**

Perhaps the most challenging struggle the church faces is a question of its relevance for a community that once revered it as the lifeblood of African-American culture. But Lee said members shouldn't be distracted by the difference in how injustice plays out in this country.

"I feel we're fighting a more nuanced fight," he said. "Back then, the issues were a lot clearer because you could actually see segregation. But if you look at the statistics the issues are very similar."

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Although the community no longer relies on the church the way it did during the Jim Crow era, it still looks to it to solve issues of injustice, largely based on the glamorized characterization of the civil rights movement.

"A lot of time the church receives a critique that is not its to bear," Lee said. "People want the church to receive all of the weight of systems that are unjust and dysfunctional."

But Rivers said although black institutions like the church can help get closer to that goal by spreading a positive message and teaching, that's a job for both individuals in the black community and the federal government to help carry out.

"We can't be the only ones responsible," he said. "Teaching has a commensurate side, it's called learning. For every bit of teaching there's got to be some learning."

While Lee said the community needs to learn from the successes of the of the civil rights era, it cannot get caught up in fictitious characterization of the church, or rely on one or two individuals to lead the way or gain fame from the movement.

"I think the church has to come all hands on deck, and in that the church has to use all of the resources of this current age," he said. "We have the resources because of technology to shift what the movement looks like. But it cannot just be about people seeing our faces and us becoming leaders it has to be about empowering people, organizing people, training people so that they have a sense of what to do, how to do it and where to do it."

## **You May Like**

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## The Black Church: From Prophecy to Prosperity

ANTHEA BUTLER

*The rhetoric last summer* at commemorations of the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington was quite different from that heard at the original march in 1963. Lament replaced the determination to gain “jobs and freedom.” Speakers deplored the Supreme Court’s rollbacks of affirmative action and the Voting Rights Act. They condemned the not-guilty verdict in the George Zimmerman trial. Instead of celebrating the great march, the anniversary events sounded a plea for a new civil rights movement.

Largely missing from that call, however, was the strong prophetic voice of black religion that Martin Luther King, Jr. had famously articulated from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Fifty years later, many black leaders were advising young African Americans to honor King and other heroes and heroines of the movement by altering their personal behavior.

Reverend Al Sharpton passionately declared, “Don’t you ever think that men like Medgar Evers died to give you the right to be a hoodlum or to give you the right to be a thug. That is not what they gave their life about.” President Obama similarly observed,

[W]hat had once been a call for equality of opportunity, the chance for all Americans to work hard and get ahead, was too often framed as a mere desire for government support—as if we had no agency in our own liberation, as if poverty was an excuse for not raising your child, and the bigotry of others was reason to give up on yourself. All of that history is how progress stalled.

Both speeches represent an important shift in focus: from denouncing structural racism and equality to viewing the dysfunctional behavior of some African Americans as a key cause of the continued economic gap between the races.

That shift originated with religious figures in the black community, and it remains an important and controversial tendency in the African-American church today. Unlike the righteous anger of the 1960s, the message from many black ministers is respectability—an internal focus on the personal failings of African Americans, particularly poor ones. How did this shift occur?

After the heyday of the freedom movement passed in the 1970s, two contrasting paths gradually emerged in black churches: one stayed true to the message of social justice while the other turned to an emphasis on individual morality and a gospel of prosperity. Most rising religious leaders took the latter approach. In the 1990s T.D. Jakes—whom *Time* dubbed “America’s Preacher”—organized “Women Thou Art Loosed” conferences that promoted spiritual and sexual health. These gatherings, which attracted audiences of over 10,000 women, combined spiritual counseling, group therapy, and personal confession. In a dramatic style, Jakes spoke to women about the abuse they had suffered, and they let their emotions flow. The sermons were just the cornerstone of a thriving business, which included teaching materials, a book, and a movie. Jakes used the message of respectability and prosperity to build a massive support group for women, who are the majority in most black churches. While Jakes said little about politics, other ministers employed talk of moral uplift to advance their

views about social issues—in particular, their opposition to same-sex marriage.

Bishop Eddie Long's massive New Birth Missionary Baptist Church outside of Atlanta became a leader in that campaign, as well as a mainstay of the prosperity gospel movement. Long preaches mainly on those Bible verses that seem to promise material gains if one tithes to the church and leads a sin-free life. Verses such as Proverbs 3:9–10 ("Honor the Lord from your wealth and from the first of all your produce; so your barns will be filled with plenty and your vats overflow with new wine") urge members to give at least 10 percent of their income and promise that, in return, they will receive financial blessings from God. Long cuts a flamboyant figure with his muscular body, displayed in tight T-shirts worn under expensive suit jackets. His sermons focus on how healthy heterosexual relationships can produce "Godly men."

Long's firm stand against same-sex marriage brought him national attention. He appointed Bernice King, daughter of the civil rights icon and a preacher herself, an elder of his church. In late 2004 he organized a "Reigniting the Legacy" march to oppose same-sex marriage. Twenty-four thousand people strode through the streets of Atlanta, led by Long and King. "There has not been a unified voice out of our community since the assassination of Dr. King," Long said. Most black Americans, he claimed, want "to go back to basic, fundamental moral beliefs."

His stance created an uproar in both the LGBT community and among civil rights leaders. Earlier that year, Coretta Scott King had objected that "a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriages is a form of gay bashing, and it would do nothing at all to protect traditional marriages." Julian Bond, the former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee leader and Georgia state senator, wondered, "with so many problems affecting black Americans . . . what harm is done by people in love?" But many other black churches echoed Long's opposition to homosexual rights. In 2004, aided by a ballot measure banning gay marriage, George W. Bush gained 16 percent of the African-American vote in Ohio, almost double the percentage he had received in 2000. Without

Bush's narrow win in that state, John Kerry would have been elected president.

The pinnacle of Long's moral crusade occurred, ironically, with the funeral of Coretta Scott King in February 2006, which,

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*By criticizing Jeremiah Wright's anger, Obama also seemed to be dismissing the prophetic tradition of the black church.*

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with Bernice King's approval, was held at Long's megachurch. In attendance were former presidents George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Jimmy Carter, as well as the incumbent George W. Bush. Bernice King sat next to them on stage while civil rights leaders Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton were relegated to the pews. The service—filled with tears, laughter, and tension—symbolized not just the passing of a movement icon but the rise of the politics of respectability. Even Bill Clinton invoked the new paradigm: "You want to treat our friend Coretta like a role model? Then model her behavior."

Ironically, in September 2010 Long had to defend himself against a civil suit alleging he had sexual relations with four young male members of the New Birth congregation. The minister was accused of grooming the young men for sexual relationships while they were minors, and then consummating those relationships when they reached sixteen, the legal age of consent in Georgia. According to a civil suit, Long and one of the plaintiffs even conducted a ring exchange ceremony. The case was settled for an undisclosed amount of money and never went to trial. Long continues to head the church, though both his reputation and his congregation have significantly dwindled in size.

*Some black ministers* did continue advocating the politics of social justice that was so integral to building the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. One controversial example is the Trinity United Church of Christ

on the South Side of Chicago, whose former pastor was Reverend Jeremiah Wright and whose current leader is Reverend Otis Moss.

Although Wright became an infamous figure to many during the 2008 campaign, he had long been committed to racial, economic, and sexual equality both in the United States and abroad. His harsh style of preaching, sometimes peppered with language from his days as a Marine, endeared him to black Chicagoans. Trinity reached every class of African Americans, from young gang members to such luminaries as Oprah Winfrey and Obama. Early in the 1990s, Wright preached his support for gay rights in the sermon "Good News for Homosexuals." He asserted that gay people had the same access to God as heterosexuals and were just as worthy of His love and protection. That was a courageous act at the time and, in many black churches, remains one today.

The April 2003 video of Wright declaring "God Damn America" that surfaced during the 2008 campaign ought to be understood in context. In that sermon, "Confusing God and Government," Wright was condemning the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which had just begun, as well as other interventions abroad: "[W]e [America] cannot see clearly what it is that we do," he said. "We call it 'Crusade' when we turn right around and say our God condones the killing of innocent civilians as a necessary means to an end." To Wright's congregation, it was not a unusual speech. Apart from those three inflammatory words, his rhetoric was similar to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s calls for abolishing poverty and ending the war in Vietnam.

In his response to the furor over Wright's comments, Obama unwittingly revealed his agreement with the politics of respectability:

The fact that so many people are surprised to hear that anger in some of Reverend Wright's sermons simply reminds us of the old truism that the most segregated hour in American life occurs on Sunday morning. That anger is not always productive; indeed, all too often it distracts attention from solving real problems; it keeps us from squarely facing our own complicity in our condition, and prevents the African-American community from forging the alli-

ances it needs to bring about real change.

By criticizing Wright's anger, Obama also seemed to be dismissing the prophetic tradition of the black church and to be blaming African Americans for helping cause their own problems. His election that year proved to many black ministers that talk of respectability works.

But when the president announced in May 2012 that he had changed his mind and now supported same-sex marriage, he challenged that conservative turn. Many anti-gay African Americans were predictably dismayed. The Coalition of African-American Pastors, which has 1,300 members across the country, sent him a public letter protesting the move. Coalition leader Reverend William Owens charged, "The man holding the most powerful position in the world is stooping to lead the country down an immoral path." He even called for black people to withhold their vote. Owens's campaign failed, of course. Obama received more African-American votes in 2012 than he had in 2008.

The issue of same-sex marriage continues to divide both black ministers and their congregants. In 2012 Maryland voters narrowly approved a gay marriage referendum after the state legislature had enacted a bill with the same end. Most African-American pastors strongly opposed it, even as they backed Obama's re-election. According to Jamal Bryant of Baltimore's Empowerment Temple, same-sex marriage "disrupts the fabric of the culture. . . . It goes against our biblical understanding of what marriage represents in our society—especially in the African-American community, where homes have already been fractured."

Yet other black ministers supported the referendum, as did the state's chapter of the NAACP. Reverend Delman Coates of Mount Ennon Baptist Church testified for the original measure before the Maryland legislature. "It is not a question of private belief," Coates argued, "but whether all citizens of this state have the same rights." He also organized a White House meeting with other black leaders who agreed with his position. Still, a Pew Poll published in the spring of 2013 found that just 40 percent of African Americans back

same-sex marriage, while 49 percent of whites do.

For black churches, this issue is at the core of an ongoing debate about how to interpret the legacy of the civil rights movement. Pastors like Jamal Bryant and Eddie Long believe that all the attention on LGBT rights has overshadowed the rights of blacks and other people of color. While they like Obama's talk of respectability, they oppose his pragmatic sympathy with a constituency they consider immoral. Meanwhile, right-wing state politicians and federal judges, nearly all of whom are white, are busily attempting to reverse some key achievements of the freedom movement—affirmative action and voting rights, most prominently.

Some black ministers are pushing back, however. Take Moral Mondays in North Carolina. Over the past year, William Barber, a prophetic preacher ordained in the Disciples of Christ and president of the North Carolina NAACP, has led a series of marches of Christians and non-Christians of all races in

Raleigh, the state capital. They are protesting, among other policies, a voter restriction law passed by the deeply conservative Republican legislative majority. As a result of these protests, which have drawn a good deal of local media coverage, the Department of Justice has filed a lawsuit to prevent the new law from being implemented.

It is Barber's view that

God desires to save us from anything that oppresses us—racial injustice, economic injustice, and anything that works against the solidarity of the human community. The contemporary church needs to hear this afresh because too often it has become so accommodative to the worship of wealth that its theology is often viewed as a justification of economic injustice.

Amen.

Anthea Butler is associate professor of religion and Africana studies at the University of Pennsylvania.

## TO OUR CONTRIBUTORS

*A few suggestions:*

(1) We prefer electronic submissions, but if you're submitting by postal mail, remember that we can't consider articles unless they're accompanied by a cover letter and stamped, self-addressed envelope. If you are submitting to *Dissent* electronically, please include a postal address and phone number as well as a cover letter. Our email address is [editors@dissentmagazine.org](mailto:editors@dissentmagazine.org).

(2) Please don't write to ask whether we're interested in such and such an article—it makes for useless correspondence. Look at our last few issues to see if your idea fits in. Or take a chance and send us your article. We will not consider manuscripts submitted simultaneously to several publications.

(3) Check all your figures, dates, names, etc.—they're the author's responsibility. Please use inclusive language so that we don't have to make adjustments during editing.

(4) Notes and footnotes should also be typed double-spaced, on a separate page. As we're not an academic journal, we prefer that they, wherever possible, be dropped altogether or worked into the text.

(5) We're usually quick in giving editorial decisions. If there's a delay, it's because a few editors are reading your article.

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