

Preaching to the Black Middle Class

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With increasing frequency, congregations that have historically been predominantly white in membership are being visited by black persons, many of whom may seek membership in those churches. While this practice has only recently become widespread, the fact is that black Americans began their historic relationship to the Christian church in this country by seeking membership in predominantly white congregations. In the main their attempts were discouraged or not allowed after the Civil War. Now the move by black people to visit and affiliate with white congregations is again underway.

This shift in the racial mix of a predominantly or exclusively white congregation presents important challenges to the preachers who must now expect the presence of non-white persons in the Sunday morning congregation, anticipate their spiritual needs, and address those needs in weekly sermons. It is with an eye toward being helpful to preachers in this situation that I offer the following reflections.

What is the responsibility of the preacher who must speak to members of the black middle class? What are the themes that must be explored in sermons addressed to this particular group of listeners if those sermons are to be both helpful to black middle class persons and faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ? I want to suggest that there are two issues that must be discussed on a continuing basis. The first issue is the impact of racism upon an upwardly mobile black American, and the need to heal the wounds opened by racism as it operates at that particular level. The second issue is the matter of responsible Christian living. Once a black person becomes upwardly mobile, how will that person live both in terms of personal lifestyle, and in terms of attitudes towards and relations with persons who remain in the grip of poverty and oppression?

Certainly, a year of pulpit work will need to cover a wide variety of other themes; Christian doctrines, liturgical year observances, social issues, life cycle and life crisis issues, and the careful exposition of a variety of forms of biblical literature. All of these can be helpfully addressed to black middle class persons as preachers seek to offer a balanced diet of sermon material. It is my contention, however, that preaching that is to be helpful to members of the black middle class must also explore these themes of racism and responsible Christian living.

This question of what themes must be given regular attention in sermons addressed to the black middle class is important to two categories of preachers. One is the black preacher who serves a congregation where large numbers of black middle class persons are present. The other is the white preacher who sees an increasing number of black faces mingled in a predominantly white congregation. For the black preacher, it must be remembered that sermons

geared toward the needs and circumstances of the black working class will not be as helpful for the upwardly mobile black middle class members of the congregation. These two groups experience life in the United States in substantially different ways. For the white preacher, it must be remembered that the black and white members of the congregation also experience life in this country in substantially different ways. Membership in a predominantly white local church is no guarantee that the other predominantly white institutions of American society will be as open and receptive to black people.

The problem for an upwardly mobile black middle class person is an inability to follow other ethnic groups into the mainstream of American life because of the continuing realities of racism. Some black persons seek to enjoy the best of both worlds. They seek to move into the mainstream of American life, adapting themselves to many of the values and social customs held by the majority culture. However, they also consciously seek to hold onto certain cherished aspects of their own cultural heritage; church affiliation, fraternal groups, ethnic foods, and perhaps a black residential neighborhood.

Another option facing this group, one that has long been employed by other ethnic groups, is a search for total assimilation into the mainstream of American life. Those who seek to follow this route will maintain few if any relations with any black institutions or black neighborhoods. In most instances they will seek to avoid those institutions that might bring them into social contact with black people of low and moderate incomes.

A third option available for purposes of discussion is total separation. Appeals to separatism are not uncommon to black people. They have been made by white groups like the American Colonization Society in the nineteenth century and the KKK in the twentieth century. They have also been made by black men like Marcus Garvey and Elijah Muhammad. It is not likely, however, that black middle class persons will respond to these offers. They have trained for and now want to profit from their participation in the socio-economic mainstream of this country. So long as that appeals to them, it is not likely, nor is there much historical evidence to suggest, that appeals to racial separation will gain much positive response from persons in this group.

Even though selective acculturation or total assimilation are the preferred options for upwardly mobile black persons, both of these avenues present obvious and frustrating obstacles. Black people seeking to follow other ethnic groups into the American melting pot soon discover that their skin color makes them unmeltable. No changing of last names, no cosmetic surgery, no abandoning of religious practices, no alteration of speech patterns, and no adoption of the proper social graces, can in any way offset the far-reaching implications of being black in American society.

Black professionals working in a predominantly white environment live under a daily pressure to prove to their white colleagues, and often to themselves, that they deserve to be where they are. They face the added burden of having to outperform their white counterparts in order to merely stay even with them in the areas of professional recognition, salary and career advancement. Black people still remain locked out of many areas of corporate, academic, and political life. Even when they are admitted to the upper echelons of

those fields, they face continued exclusion from that network of private parties and private clubs where so many professional relationships are fostered, and where so much important information is shared.

In short, black people are kept constantly aware of the fact that despite being school administrators, government officials, corporate executives, or university professors, they remain black in the eyes of American society and therefore remain subject to racial discrimination though often in quite subtle and sophisticated forms. In the eyes of white society formal training, economic status, and personal and professional aspirations have done little to distinguish the upwardly mobile black middle class from other black people who remain physically confined to the ghettos of our cities and the tenant farms of our rural regions.

The great black scholar, W.E.B. DuBois, spoke of the bitter frustration that grows out of the black's position in American society:

One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spat upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.¹

DuBois referred to this sense of two-ness on the part of black Americans as “double consciousness.” It was true when he wrote these words in 1903, and it remains true for black Americans to this day. My contention is that this double consciousness is experienced in a different way by blacks who are upwardly mobile and blacks who are confined to an underclass status.

Precisely because upwardly mobile black middle class persons have tried to play by the rules of American society and have still been rejected because of skin color, they suffer from many mental and physical problems. Among these are depression, marital strife, child abuse, alcoholism, loss of self-esteem, hostility towards white society, intense jealousy of other blacks whose careers might be moving more quickly, and a staggering suicide rate among black males. A recent sociological study examined many of these problems, especially as they effected black people working in major American corporations.²

In the face of these problems and frustrations, how can the church in general, and preaching in particular, respond in its ministry to these persons? One of the most helpful resources for handling this problem is *Pastoral Care in the Black Church*, by Edward P. Wimberly, Jr. He begins his study by referring to the four classic functions of pastoral ministry as they were defined by William Clebsch and Charles Jaekle: healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling. Clebsch and Jaekle contend that in the face of the various crises and frustra-

tions of life, the task of the pastor is to aid people in (1) finding healing for the spiritual wounds that have been opened, (2) being sustained through the crisis until healing can occur, (3) being guided to the ways by which the crisis can be resolved, and (4) achieving reconciliation which serves as the sure indicator that the problem has been fully and finally resolved.

Wimberly contends that pastors who ministered to black people have not been able to perform all four of those pastoral functions:

guiding and sustaining have been dominant functions in the history of pastoral care in the black church. Reconciliation took a secondary position, and healing became very difficult because of the racial climate. The racial climate in America, from slavery to the present, has made sustaining and guiding more prominent than healing and reconciling, because racism and oppression have produced wounds in the black community that can be healed only to the extent that healing takes place in the structure of the total society.³

Sermons that are focused upon the guiding motif could address the question of how to live and work in the presence of racism. They could also suggest the things that black people, and the white people in the congregation as well, can do to resist the many forms of racism, and to weaken them and eventually bring them to an end.

Preaching that focuses on sustaining can provide hope and encouragement to people who feel crushed by the weight of the problems that press down upon them. Here the pastor must seek to reinforce that crucial sense of self-worth and self-confidence that racism attacks and drains away virtually everyday. Of course, that sense of self-worth must be grounded not in any appeals to racial pride or cultural heritage alone, although those are sources of encouragement. Primarily, preaching the sustaining word must flow out of the proclamation that the self-worth of black people is rooted in the fact that they are the children of a God who is no respecter of persons (Acts 10: 34), and that God did not order and does not will their oppression. Preaching to the black middle class is, at this point, not substantially different from preaching to black people who occupy a less secure economic position. The main difference is an understanding of the places and ways in which the two groups meet and experience racism in America.

II

No one who preaches to black middle class persons can be limited to the single issue of racism. Of equal importance and urgency is the matter of responsible Christian living as it impacts persons who are economically upwardly mobile. Preaching must address the issues of selfishness, greed, pride, social responsibility, the maintenance of moral rectitude and personal piety, and a continuing interest in the condition of the millions of other oppressed persons in this country and around the world who desperately need their aid and advocacy.

With a few notable exceptions, the greatest failure of Black Theology has

occurred at precisely this point. Black theologians have pointed out the sins of white society with broad strokes, but have not turned a critical eye toward the sins of the black community, especially the upwardly mobile black middle class. Preoccupied with the liberation motifs in Exodus 19 and Luke 4, Black Theology has not heard Paul say: "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Black Theology has been duly interested in bringing the captives out of their bondage, but has not been as attentive to drawing black people into a covenant relation with God that would guide them into responsible living once a measure of freedom has been attained.

A recent book by J. Deotis Roberts illustrates this point. He speaks of the pastoral role of the black church as being two-fold: a priestly and a prophetic function. He says: "The priestly ministry of the black church refers to the healing, comforting, and succoring work. The prophetic ministry involves its social justice and socially transforming aspects."⁴ Nowhere does Roberts challenge the black community on the question of its own sins. This is a misuse of the model of the biblical prophets. Even though Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia were actively oppressing the people of Israel, the prophets addressed themselves to the sins of the people of Israel. They spoke hard and challenging words to their own people, and they suffered as a result. Black Theology, black preachers, and white preachers who address black persons who are members of their congregations must rescue the prophetic model and must speak words of correction not only to white society, but also to black people, and especially to the black middle class.

The troubling tendency on the part of so many black professionals is to separate themselves from other black people who want and need the benefit of their insights and experiences. Too many black professionals are unwilling to serve as role models and resources for black youth, who are then left to aspire to become athletes or actors or addicts, because those are the only celebrated vocations in their inner-city communities. Once free from poverty and confinement within ghettos, too many black persons are willing to enjoy their new found prosperity while remaining unmoved by the fact that millions of other blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and native Americans continue to face a life that Thomas Hobbes best described as "cold, nasty, brutish, and short."⁵

Equally troubling is the impact of materialism upon this group, not as a problem in and of itself, but materialism as the determining factor in ascribing worth and value to human life. Upwardly mobile black people follow the lead of the majority culture in this country in using the quantity and quality of material goods as a crucial measurement in deciding who is and who is not a person of worth and value.

This issue was raised in the report of the Black Theology Project that met in Atlanta in 1977. That report concluded:

We are concerned about people whose desperation is not abject material poverty, but poverty of soul and spirit. We do not believe that better jobs and bigger houses, color televisions and latest model cars prove that people have attained the abundant life of which Jesus spoke. That abundant life cannot be experienced by a people captive to the idolatry of a sensate and materialistic culture.

We abhor the capitulation of some of our people to values based on the assumption that things make for security, and that distance from the distressed masses makes for a trustworthy barricade against the racism that holds us all in contempt. Commitment to physical gratification as the purpose of life, and avoidance of the Gospel's moral and ethical standards provides false foundations for hard choices. Such false values divide and separate a people who would be free.

The identification of black liberation with the material success of a few, physically and mentally severed from the black masses, makes mockery of the unity essential for the salvation of us all. Even the material good fortune of that few is poisoned by the emptiness and isolation from the people's struggle without which the mission of Jesus Christ can be neither understood nor undertaken.⁶

The Old Testament prophets would have faced a tough challenge if called upon to preach to a black middle class constituency. This group is, at one and the same time, "those who are at ease in Zion" (Amos 6:1), and "the stranger in the land who has been wrongfully oppressed" (Ezekiel 22:29). This group enjoys the benefits of life in this country more than does most of the black population. Yet, these upwardly mobile persons remain linked to that black population through a common victimization by the effects of racism.

It is regrettable that even scholarly research has not yet begun to address the question of the spiritual needs of the black middle class, and the ways in which preaching can help to meet those needs. Considerable research has been done on the black church and black preaching from an inner-city perspective. Henry Mitchell, in his book, *Black Preaching*, admits to this inner-city focus. He speaks about the transition from the plantation to the ghetto, and of the many pressures of the urban experience.⁷ No one has yet studied the dynamics at work in predominantly black congregations composed of persons, many of whom live in affluent suburban regions and hold responsible positions in the corporate world, in order to determine what forms and what themes make for effective preaching in that setting. The situation is not as bleak for studying preaching as it is done in predominantly white churches where black persons are present. The two studies that come to mind most quickly are *Black Preaching: Select Sermons in the Presbyterian Tradition*,⁸ and *Black Gospel/White Church*,⁹ which is a collection of sermons gathered from throughout the life of the Episcopal Church in America. However, the shortcoming of both of these studies is that the sermons are all delivered by black preachers and do not demonstrate how a white pastor has tried to address the needs and concerns of black parishioners.

Alan Boesak, the black South African theologian, wrote: "The crisis that faces preaching is not related to the concept of preaching as a form of spoken communication. It is a crisis of content."¹⁰ The church and preaching remain important for most middle class blacks. The critical question is whether the content of the preaching they hear from black and white preachers will meet their actual needs, both to comfort and challenge them, as they face life in American society.

NOTES

¹W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1961), 17.

²George Davis and Glegg Watson, *Black Life in Corporate America* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1982).

³Edward P. Wimberly, *Pastoral Care in the Black Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 20-21.

⁴J. Deotis Roberts, *Roots of a Black Future: Family and Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 110.

⁵Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* quoted from "A History of Philosophy", vol. 5, 1, by Frederick Copleston (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1964), 42.

⁶Gayraud Wilomre and James Cone, *Black Theology: A Documentary History from 1966-1979* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), 347-348.

⁷Henry Mitchell, *Black Preaching* (New York: Lippincott, 1970), 64.

⁸Robert T. Newbold, *Black Preaching: Select Sermons in the Presbyterian Tradition* (Philadelphia: The Geneva Press, 1977).

⁹John M. Burgess, *Black Gospel/White Church* (New York: Seabury, 1982).

¹⁰Alan Boesak, *The Finger of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1982), 2.