

Lecture 9

Black Churches Claiming Civil Rights

What role did Christian traditions and congregational life and play in the promotion of civil rights for African Americans?

I. Introduction

- A. MLK once said that 11:00 Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America
 - 1. Separate development from white religions
 - a. legacy of “one drop” segregation
 - b. black aware of white but white not of black because of importance of knowing what powerful are up to
 - c. great diversity no “black church”
 - 2. churches still predominately made up of one race or another
 - a. suburban African Americans traveling into city for church
 - b. interracial families to black churches for children
 - c. acceptance of interracial stronger in black communities
- B. **Racism** as counter theme to the American story
 - 1. involuntary migration; absence of democracy; absence of social progress measured by economic stability and cultural acceptance
 - 2. refutation of individuality and humanity
 - 3. cannot understand without black history

II. Southern Church life

- A. Legacies of slavery
 - 1. reading illegal so reading Bible precious gift
 - 2. “invisible institution” Christian message of liberation preached in hush harbors and sung about in code
 - 3. strong connection of Old Testament liberation narrative
 - 4. “Africanisms” a part of culture but not stated as so by Christians
 - a. traditions to erase anything “pagan”
 - b. Muslim slaves as well, mostly lost
- B. Denominations in the South
 - 1. denominations that sent missionaries to slaves
 - 2. Methodists (w/Methodists main Southern denominations)
 - a. Methodists--AME, AMEZ, Christian ME, United Methodist (white church)
 - b. missionaries to south immediately after Civil War--AME headquarters moved to Nashville in 1865
 - c. centralized authority under control of bishops
 - d. child baptism, low church, Bible based, personal morality
 - e. missionaries to Africa
 - f. cultural and educational institutions
 - i. Wilberforce College est. 1856 (in Ohio)

- ii. oldest journal owned by black people A M. E. Review (1881) f.
 - g. strong women--AMEZ made deacons in 1894 and ministers in 1898
 - 3. Baptists
 - a. independent local churches grouped in loose associations
 - b. more free than Methodists to respond to local conditions
 - c. largest association: **National Baptist Convention USA, Inc.**
 - d. adult baptism, low church, Bible-based, personal morality c. missionaries to Africa: Liberia, West coast countries
 - e. cultural and educational institutions
 - i. Morehouse College and Spelman College in Atlanta most famous
 - f. even now women not accepted in most congregations as ministers
 - g. women acted as preachers without ordination
 - 4. Catholics (small in New Orleans, Baltimore)
 - a. Catholicism from slave owners, just like became Baptists or Methodists
 - b. Ministered by white priests and nuns
 - c. More fluidity with African religions—healing traditions, music, non-Catholic and other; parallel activities by people
 - d. Segregated churches in large cities but under white control with no ritual/theological difference from white Catholics
- C. Characteristics shared by Protestant African American churches in South
 - 1. History
 - a. importance of remembering who they are and what they went through in slave times and after
 - b. connection of community history with sacred history of Israel
 - c. calling their community and general culture to justice
 - i. prophetic tradition
 - 2. Solidarity
 - a. church as only enduring institution after slavery (family broken)
 - b. place for social exchange, artistic expression, political arena, training ground for leaders, education, but limited by resources
 - c. close knit community
 - d. source of humanity and solace, even if not always for agitation
 - e. “Victorian” morality—pentecostal groups strict dress codes, no drinking, no gambling—often “woman’s religion”
 - 3. lay involvement
 - a. poverty and no education in larger society
 - b. education in Sunday School (adult as well a children)
 - c. social organization when can be fully human
 - d. express African heritage --from Africanisms to sending missionaries

4. importance of preacher
 - a. preaching as experience as authenticating force, not analysis
 - b. as community leader
 - c. apprenticed not educated
 - d. preaching in addition to farming
 - e. ministers with more than one church
 - f. mediator between black and white
 - i. trying to balance accommodation and assertion
 - g. tension between male preacher and female congregants
5. development of oral tradition because of illiteracy
 - a. importance of music and preaching
 - b. preaching like singing or chanting; formula; climax
 - c. repetitious, spontaneous, thematic
 - d. close association with music: rhythm, scale, melody, participation
 - e. Africanisms--call-response, mytho-poetical
 - f. merging of personal and collective story
 - g. distinction between arts, theology, morality
 - h. Jazz, rap, street talk (from church to auditorium)
6. "the frenzy"
 - a. shouting, responding, singing, clapping, testimonials, fainting
 - b. emotional release from everyday binds and toils
 - c. ecstasy
 - d. interaction with preacher, each other
 - e. spontaneity, movement

III. Utilizing the Black Church during Civil Rights Era

A. History

1. in north, discrimination against black Christians
 - a. forced to sit in balcony, Methodists leave and form on denomination
 - b. black Catholics having own parishes, not permitted to join others—ahead in desegregating schools but only in late 40s and very slow
2. diversification of churches because of Great Migration
 - a. Chicago as end point of railroads bring blacks to work in cities
 - b. everything from storefront to Episcopal to Catholic churches
 - c. Rev. Jeremiah Wright as United Church of Christ
 - i. Puritan heritage
3. black liberation theology
 - a. shift from Moses to Jesus as Liberation—long history
 - b. influenced by Latin America Cath. theologians to blacks, women's, Hispanics
 - c. dark skinned Middle Easterner "black"
 - d. black Jesus
 - i. multiple color Jesus

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to bring good tidings unto the humble; He hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the eyes to them that are bound. Isaiah 61

- e. NT is story of marginal and outcasts
- f. God desires liberation, change and transformation of persons and societies
- g. religion is that fight from the bottom up
- h. importance of prophetic spirit of criticism and
- 4. conservative theology, liberal politics
 - a. voting democratic
 - b. homosexuality issue—compared to black situation before Civil Rights (anti-miscengenation laws) but black churches do not approve
- B. Solidarity
 - 1. great reluctance among ministers at first
 - 2. MLK using traditional role of preacher to organize
 - 3. place of grass roots organizing
 - 4. Africa as positive place of strength against white accusations of “primitive” paganism
- C. lay involvement
 - 1. active involvement of congregations
 - 2. protest marches, sit-ins, Freedom rides
 - 3. hospitality to northerners who came south
 - 4. continuing tradition of addressing needs of community: nursing homes, scholarships, soup kitchens, employment programs, HIV-AIDS
- D. importance of the preacher
 - 1. Martin Luther King charismatic preaching
 - 2. Southern Leadership Conference
 - 3. individual ministers lending churches
 - a. bombings
 - b. threats and murders
 - c. mediators between black and white
 - 4. “linksters” between black and white communities
- E. Oral Traditions
 - 1. Freedom songs
 - 2. communications
- F. The “frenzy”
 - 1. emotional enthusiasm, commitment to Christ and to liberty
 - 2. strong preaching

IV. Conclusion

- A. separate development of black and white communities because of segregation, often imposed by churches themselves
- B. close connection between church and needs of the community because often only source of protection and solace
- C. strong prophetic tradition—hard on own people, hard on country
- D. diversity of styles and theologies but increasingly more solidarity