

James H. Costen³³

BLACK THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION: ITS CONTEXT, CONTENT AND CONDUCT

With the founding of Wilberforce University and Ashmun Institute, now Lincoln University, Black theological education in institutional form appeared upon the American scene with great significance. For prior to this time, efforts at the general and theological education of slaves and “free Negroes” were fragmented and whimsical, dependent upon the goodwill of a particular slaveholder or an advocate of abolition. With the founding of these schools, seminaries and departments of religion were included in the curriculum of practically every Black college in America. Indeed, these schools were established for the catechetical training of Black religious leaders.

A recitation of the prominent schools developed for the theological education of Blacks is impressive. Even more impressive and time consuming would be a “parade of the great ones” educated in these institutions. Suffice it to say that most of America’s Black religious leadership were drawn to the breast of these schools and nursed into personal, spiritual and social maturity.

The quality of education varied from institution to institution. Some were Bible Schools, training their students to interpret the Christian faith with a degree of competency. Others were carbon copies of institutions of the North, which reflected the pedagogy of the white missionaries who were instrumental in their founding. Thus, biblical languages, rhetoric, elocution, exegesis and a variety of other courses constituted the curriculum. These institutions and their students demonstrated a fierce determination to be free and to lift brothers and sisters from the trash heaps of

³³This article was published in 1994 by Dr. James H. Costen, president of the Interdenominational Theological Center, 1983-1997.
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slavery and the ravages of discrimination.

When the Interdenominational Theological Center began in 1959, there were seventeen Black theological seminaries operational;³⁴ only Gammon Seminary and Howard School of Religion were accredited. An important reason for founding ITC was to provide accredited, affordable theological education for a larger number of Black students. Harry V. Richardson, the first president of ITC, said, “in 1958 there were only 387 Black students registered in all degree programs at schools belonging to the Association of Theological Schools.”²

While this number has grown dramatically to 2,917 today,³⁵ the need exists for leadership that is biblically and theologically sound, sensitive and skilled in interpersonal relations. Leadership for approximately 65,000 Black churches in the United States³⁶ must be properly educated. This *is* JTC's *challenge*. Thus, it is necessary to discuss the context, the content and the conduct of Black theological education.

The Context of Black Theological Education

Relevant theology is always contextual. This is to say that theology, from any perspective, must be related to its present circumstances. Having said this, however, it is necessary to emphasize that we must take full advantage of the past—its accomplishments, learning and insights. To neglect these truths is to fail to listen and be receptive to God in this existential moment!

³⁴ Harry V. Richardson. “The Seminary Training of Negro Ministers. 1959.” TMS, p.7. Archives and Special Collections, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta.

³⁵ Association of Theological Schools, *Fact Book on Theological Education for the Academic Year 1984-1985* (Vandalia, Ohio: The Association, [1984]), 13-16, especially 15.

³⁶ The Congress of National Black Churches, Inc., Washington, DC, 1980.

The Sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches met in Vancouver, British Columbia. This Assembly called together persons from throughout the world to discuss and act upon those mandates which make us truly one in Jesus Christ. An emphasis of this Assembly was “Insights on Ecumenical Learning.”³⁷ These goals are instructive for the discussion of the context of theological education:

- To help each other to believe in Jesus Christ as the source of life and to grow in faith as Christian persons;
- To discover together that God has given us *one world*;
- To participate in the struggle for global justice and peace;
- To participate in communities of prophetic witness;
- To relate our local struggles to global perspectives.³⁸

Contextually, the Black Church and Black theological institutions are laboring to become excellent centers of learning and sharing. Many people find it hard to accept Jesus Christ as Lord. Thus, the growth of many Black churches is waning, and people are distrustful of the church’s relevance. U.S. government sources indicate that, in 1984, 33.8% of Blacks live below the poverty level.³⁹ Unemployment among Blacks is 18.3%⁴⁰ and much greater for Black youth.

The national context in which we do our theological education is increasingly calloused. People are becoming less important. Our giant military-industrial machinery is growing at an alarming rate. Current national leadership finds it logical to increase our defense budget by \$35 billion dollars next year and finds it difficult to appropriate \$20 million to establish an Academy of

³⁷ David Gill, *Gathered for Life*, Official Report, VI Assembly World Council of Churches (Geneva: The Council, 1983), 101.

³⁸ David B. Barrett, ed., *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Study of Churches and Religions in the Modern World, AD 1900-2000* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 780.

³⁹ U.S. Department of Commerce, *Poverty in the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1984).

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment and Earnings* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1984).

Peace and Conflict Resolution.⁴¹ Would not it be wonderful to “wage peace” instead of waging war?

Vancouver reminds us that Americans are part of one world and Christians and nonbelievers in other parts of the world must be considered in our theological reflections. The opportunity exists to make a witness that might break the cycle of hopelessness. By the year 2000 A.D. 393 million Christians will live in Africa alone.⁴² By that year the majority of the world’s Christians will live in Africa, Asia, Latin and Central America. While this citation might suggest Christian triumphalism, it has a sobering reality that addresses Black Americans and others with great challenge and profundity. These teeming masses *are* the “have-nots” of the world, and yet the Christian Church’s greatest growth is among them, the “despised and rejected.” Doesn’t the Bible speak of raising up stones to praise God’s name?⁴³

Consider these startling statistics concerning the situation of American and global “have-nots”:

According to the 1981 Census Survey, 32 million people or 14 percent of our population, including close to one of every five children, are officially poor in this land of plenty. Even more disturbing is one estimate that a third of all children born in the United States during 1980 will spend some time on welfare before they reach the age of 18. The top one percent of our population owns over 20 percent of all the wealth that can be privately owned in this country, while the upper 20 percent owns nearly 80 percent of the wealth. This leaves the remaining four-fifths of the population with only 20 percent or the same amount as the

⁴¹ “Department of Defense Authorization Act,” U.S. Statutes at Large. (PL 98-525, 19 October 1984). 2492-2660. In 1984 Congress authorized an initial appropriate of \$4,000,000; \$6,000,000 in 1985; and \$10,000,000 in 1986 (eds.).

⁴² David B. Barrett, ed., *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Study of Churches and Religions in the Modern World. AD 1900-2000* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1982, 780).

⁴³ Luke 19:40

top one percent enjoys;

and

- 460 million people are starving,
- 200 million people are unemployed,
- 75,000 people flock to the overcrowded cities daily,
- World population is about to double by the turn of the century,
- World resources are being depleted,
- The eco-system which encompasses and sustains all life is pushed to the outer limits of tolerance.⁴⁴

ITC's mission is to prepare men and women to minister effectively in a national and world context similar to that just described. While it is true that ITC must prepare persons for any ministerial task, it is a greater reality that its graduates will serve the poorest of the poor—the modern day “despised and rejected.”

Let us not deceive ourselves concerning the extent of our progress. Much of Black America is less well-off today than in the past. Our mandate is to provide an educational climate at ITC that acquaints students with these facts of life. We must help them, by drawing on every biblical and social vestige of hope, to keep themselves and those they serve from sinking further into the pits of despair. Black theological education, in addition to its irreducible need to provide a sound theological framework for its community of learners, lifting the fallen, inspiring the rejected, strengthening the weakened, educating the hopeless. Black Theological education must help people appreciate the sacred by inspiring them to see God's will and love. How this is done is the topic of the next section of this discussion.

⁴⁴ Keith D. Martin, “Reaganomics and the Poor: A Theological Perspective,” *Church and Society* 73 (January-February 1983): 19.

The Content of Black Theological Education

Theological education from the Black perspective is one among many directions. Black theological education is related to the survival of the Black church and the Black community. The extent to which this specialized thrust is taken seriously will determine the extent to which it can make its greatest contribution.

Dr. Frank T. Wilson, former chair of ITC's Board of Trustees, has provided the background for the discussion of the content of Black theological education. Writing in *Periscope II*, a journal highlighting 175 years of Black Presbyterianism, Dr. Wilson states:

The Black presence, perspective and participation in the total mission of the whole church will move into dimensions without boundaries or limitations as Black membership and leadership in [the] church move

- from grateful recipients to self-reliant contributors
- from faithful functionaries to resourceful practitioners
- from crafty verbalizers to committed craft persons
- from comfortable conformist to creative catalyst
- from ruffled reactors to forceful initiators.⁴⁵

As we embody the curriculum, we want our students to know the strengths and weaknesses of their past. We want them to drink deeply from the fountains of knowledge. Our role is not to produce separatists but rather men and women who can articulate in voice and mind the certainty that God has brought them "through many dangers, toils and snares."⁴⁶

However, their education must enable them to recognize that Blacks were participants in building this country! We seek to move our students from "grateful recipients to self-reliant

⁴⁵ William Moyer. "A Strategy for Ending Domestic Violence." Church and Society 66 (November-December 1975): 43.

⁴⁶ Dr. Wilson was the editor of *Periscope I* and *II*, a publication in 1982-1983 developed by the Project 175 Committee, Office of Black Mission Development Program Agency, United Presbyterian Church in the USA.

contributors.”⁴⁷

It is necessary to understand the politics of the six constituent seminaries that comprise ITC. Polity is designed to steer us through the obstacles of ecclesiastical structures. Its usefulness is creating love for the church and health for its body. It is not for maneuvering into position for greater acclaim. Here at ITC we want to prepare men and women who love and are willing to serve the church. Our aim is to weed out the prima donnas and to place greater emphasis on servanthood—persons willing to share God’s love in compassionate ways. Thus, we seek to move “from faithful functionaries to resourceful practitioners.”

Increasingly, the Black church is able to detect the difference between those who are merely skilled in communication and those whose whole being is engaged in the welfare of the people they serve. They can detect those who cloak their selfish desires in flowing, grammatically impeccable language. At ITC we will seek to recruit, educate and place students who are emotionally and intellectually honest, possessing integrity, driven by a love for industry, committed to Jesus Christ as Lord. Then, we will have produced a cadre of religious leaders who have moved from “crafty verbalizers to committed craft persons.”⁴⁸

Theological education in the Black Community must address the issues affecting the survival of a people. It cannot be cloistered, ivory-towered and hypothetical. On the contrary, it must be relevant, consistent, engaging, confrontational, and possessing the spirit of Jesus Christ. We must equip students to know the difference between legislation designed to buoy the human spirit and legislation cloaked as religious. We propose to

⁴⁷ These words are from the hymn, “Amazing Grace,” stanza three by William Walker and were included in *Southern Harmony*, originally published by Walker in 1835.

⁴⁸ Frank Wilson, “Continuing Pilgrimage.” 7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

offer an education that will create a love for justice and righteousness and knows that risk is basic to the Christian life. We will rekindle a fervor characteristic of our ecclesiastical forebears, to be harbingers of hope and faith. This is not an easy educational goal but a necessary one. Only by adopting such can we move from being a “comfortable conformist to creative catalyst.”⁴⁹

ITC offers the theological community, here and elsewhere, one of the most outstanding examples of ecumenical contextualization. To be sure, this kind of ecumenical endeavor has problems; however, the opportunities far outweigh the difficulties. Were it not in existence it would have to be created. Where else in the world do you have six denominations cooperating in a single program of theological education?

We are the largest and most ecumenical predominantly Black theological institution in the world, and we have much to offer the broader society. We can advocate a theology of suffering that leads to active involvement. Ours can be a contribution to urban life in America. From these walls can come persons attuned to "Third World" life and thought.

ITC can lead toward a global perspective of ministry and help develop a new understanding of ecclesiology. We can assist the Black church in moving from being “ruffled reactors to forceful initiators.”⁴⁹

We have discussed the context and content of Black theological education. Now, let us examine the conduct of this educational thrust.

The Conduct of Black Theological Education

Black institutions of higher learning began in less than auspicious circumstances. Under brush arbors, in railway boxcars, church basements, lodge halls, and in ministers' homes, these

⁴⁹ Ibid

schools started. They struggled to educate a group only days removed from human servitude. Whether by the total support of Black men and women, or by the sacrificial and benevolent work of white missionaries from the North: these schools clawed out an existence that met a great need—the education of indigenous Black leadership.

Following in the noble tradition of the past, our unflagging efforts at ITC will be an administration that is efficiently run and fiscally sound. Faculty, staff, and students will be challenged constantly and assisted to excel as teachers, supporters and learners. We will attempt to conduct the affairs of this Institution in a way that every internal and external constituency will be encouraged to support generously these efforts.⁵⁰

There are over twelve hundred ITC graduates.⁵¹ These men and women are working in every state of the union and on every continent, with the possible exception of Antarctica. They are prominently involved as pastors, bishops, chaplains, teachers, and administrators. Graduates from this Institution are giving visionary leadership throughout the world. As president of this Institution, it will be my full-time effort to provide lifelong education for our graduates.

With equal zeal, I will ask for their sacrificial financial support. Through our Office of Institutional Advancement, each alumnus/a will also be encouraged to give regularly in support of this Institution. ITC is too precious to be financially strapped. Each graduate will be challenged to contribute to their *alma mater*. The time is now; the need is now. There is no greater impetus to the conduct of strong theological education than the support of those beneficiaries of its mission. Similarly, corporations, industries, foundations and philanthropic individuals need to provide sufficient financial support for ITC and other predominantly Black theological institutions.

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Information supplied by the Office of Institutional Advancement and the Registrar's

Office of ITC

Conclusion

If the Black church and the Black community are to survive, ITC must provide quality leadership for Black theological education. This lecture has discussed the three components of such an education and the resultant challenge facing ITC.

The first of these concerns the context of this educational task. Here, relevant theology is contextual, and demands that ITC prepare men and women to minister effectively in a local, national and global environment. Secondly, the content of this enterprise is embodied in ITC's curriculum, where students are taught to reflect upon the past, embrace the present and meet the future with determination. The goal is to inspire servanthood where persons share God's love in compassionate ways. Thirdly, the conduct of Black theological education requires capable administrators, committed faculty, sufficient library resources, a dedicated support staff, and alumni who recognize and express their gratitude as beneficiaries of this educational experience.

As stated earlier, the survival of the Black church and the Black community is paramount. Therefore, ITC requests that foundations, churches, corporations and concerned individuals invest in this holistic program of theological education and its graduates with an understanding of God's call to ministry.