The role of the Black pastor in the Parish Ministry

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**Recommended Citation**
SENIOR ESSAY

THE ROLE OF THE BLACK PASTOR
IN THE PARISH MINISTRY

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
for the Master of Divinity degree

By

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April 15, 1970

Interdenominational Theological Center
Atlanta, Georgia
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I. INTRODUCTION

I suppose, generally in one's mind, the mention of the role of the Black pastor suggests the physical and sociological aspects of the life of this man as he is found among a family of baptized believers whose origin (according to American History) is dated by the fateful day at Jamestown in 1619.

The inauspicious beginning of the most cruel and oppressive form of human slavery in the history of Western Civilization gave no hint of what would spring forth from the lions of the African blacks. Uprooted from all that was familiar, stripped of their dignity, betrayed by their countrymen, separated from family and tribe by design, and without the facility of the language of the New World. This was the beginning of the tortuous road of two and a half centuries of enslavement in a land, handpicked by God to be a haven for those religiously persecuted and others similarly situated. This was the beginning of the Black man's sojourn into the wilderness, where he would wander for more than a generation. The catalogue of the inexpressible cruelties of this period are far too numerous and even a brief review of them stimulates bitter feelings that are difficult to
repress. From a purely historical perspective, the fact that Black people in the slave circumstance could find any hope, any faith, to cling to is a marvelous testimony of the resiliency of the human spirit. Black slave women and Black slave men fashioned from the scraps of Biblical lore that dropped from the white man's table enough faith to believe that somewhere, somehow, someway, a better day was coming. There runs through the poetry of the Negro Spirituals that crystal-clear stream of indomitable faith. It was the end-product of a distillation process carried out in the souls of Black folk who took up the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Jesus Christ and accepted Him as their Savior, God. Thus, during the slave period and Reconstruction, there was born what is known as the Black church. The Black church is a phenomenon of many sorts. To white people, early and late, it has seemed of little consequence; to Black folk, early and late, it has been our lifes' blood. In the fullness of time God sent not His Son, but He sent forth His Sons, Black preachers, to be the shepherds of our growing Black religious institutions, namely the Black Church.
II. HISTORICAL DATA

It is not my intention to omit evidences of free blacks or the black preachers that started churches in the formal sense, but to look at the terms "Black Church" and "Black Preacher" as they were both assigned to us by the larger white community—usually with disparagement. To a large degree, the myth still persists that the Black Church is not really a genuine repository of the New Testament faith, but, rather, a mish-mash of mimicry of the white church life, voodoo and African rhythms.

It was in these particular situations that we found the Black Preacher. He was a puppet with the great white father pulling the strings. In some places, Black Preachers were permitted to hold services, but only if he was properly supervised to see that he had not forgotten his home-training. Only the Black Preacher who knew how to safeguard the interest of the whitie was allowed to function without his monitor. His sermons were censored and, if he was found saying or doing anything that would create a bitter taste in the mouth of his white counterpart, his privileges were discontinued; and, sometimes he was shot or hung as a Benedict Arnold. Suffering the indignities of the oppressor, the Black Preacher, through his
preaching, was able to communicate religion to the slave in a useful and intimate way. He made religion not only a discipline, but also a living ground of hope. Branded as the ignorant, humble, uneducated figure of his time, it was only required that the Black Preacher know his Bible and the stories within it. If he had mastered his studies well, he then received his honorary degree and was let loose to spread whitieology religion to his peers. But this was not always true, for most religious services led by the early Black Preacher that were held in swamps and forests, led Black congregations to lift up their voices to the tune of freedom spirituals denouncing deliverance by a just and avenging God, were developed.

"The anti-bellum Negro preacher was the greatest single factor in determining the spiritual destiny of the slave community. It was he who gave to the masses of his fellows a point of view which became for them a veritable door of hope. His ministry was greatly restricted as to movement, function, and opportunities for leadership; but he, himself, was blessed with one important insight. He was convinced that every human being was a child of God.

"It is out of this sense of being a child of God, that the genius of the religious folk song is born. There were three major sources from which the raw materials of Negro Spirituals derived; the Old and New Testaments, the world of nature, and the personal experiences of religion which were the common lot of the people, emerging from their inner life."\(^1\)

To continue the sojourn of the blacks and the black preacher as he moves into the realm of the institutional church, we envision him taking on the characteristics of priesthood essential to the cause of the spiritual life of slaves. His calling into the Christian Ministry was not one of preparation, homeiletical dynamics, or deep study of theological concepts which would result in his being a workman not ashamed; but, in my opinion, a calling which came out of long suffering, fear, and trembling. With his hope and his faith, the Black Preacher found himself singing many songs in a strange land that he knew not with a belief that if he would just open his mouth God would tell him what to say and what to do. As the Black Church developed from infancy until the turn of the Nineteenth Century, in many cases, the Black Preacher was the one person in the community that was free to move and have his being. He became all things to all people. He was regarded as the most honest, the most sincere, and the most devoted of those who toiled among the lowly. Untrained and unlearned, not having a known theology, the Black Preacher preached to the oppressed and depressed people; a people antagonized, ostracized and unrecognized. Constantly the Black Preacher articulated a message of deliverance, freedom and hope. He had heard and felt the lash of the white taskmaster's whip. He had heard the cries of his people as they were dehumanized and stripped of their pride and dignity. In the early Black Church such men as Nat Turner, Denmark Vessey, Black
Harry, David George, and others beheld a burning bush. They had heard a voice speaking out of a burning bush cry out to the pharaohs of the plantations of Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, South Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina to let God's people go. It was the dynamic and sincere oratorship of a divine message that stirred the emotions of Black people and stimulated their hearts and minds to head for the promised land in White America. His free-wheeling preaching received a free-wheeling response. Remarkable scenes of physical agitation and distress broke out. It was as if some sudden blast of energy, outside of the order of nature, whether evil or good, could not be easily determined, swept over the listening multitudes. There were those that walked the benches or climbed the back of the pews and walked them rigidly from the rear of the church to the front and back again, singing and shouting and flinging aside those who got in the way. Because of forceful preaching on the part of the Black Preacher, God began to make bare their arms, not in a closed room, neither in private, but in the open air. One, and another, and another were struck to the earth, exceeding trembling at the presence of powerful preaching. Others cried, with a loud and bitter cry, "What must I do to be saved?" Many human elements were, no doubt, amongst the forces which produced these scenes; imposture, hysteria, the contagion of strong emotions and the fire of excitement burning the senses. There was a strange fact of something within the congregation of the
Black Preacher that couldn't be explained. All that could be said is that body and soul were strongly inter-knitted. The wine of a strong and deep emotion poured through the feelings and thrilled every physical organ. These spiritual emotions within the Black Church among Black people awakened with great depth and beat with a stronger pulse than any other of which the human soul is capable, may well, when once they are aroused, affect with strange force within the body itself. The Black Preacher, with his flamboyant oratorship, brought his people into a relationship with the Supreme from whom blessings are sought as a means of sustaining and ameliorating life, the animator and bestower of life. This emotional response is most intense with an elaboration of trouble, tribulation, adversity and disappointment, agony, crucifixion, victory of Jesus, and the attainment of Heaven.

Over the years we have seen the Black Preacher play many roles and wear many hats. In the early church, he was the line of communication between black families who were torn assunder by the inhumanity of the white slavemaster. He protracted the fatherly image in the homes of those left fatherless. He was comfort to those who mourned. He was a friend to the friendless. He was comforter and counselor to the disturbed.

Today the Black Preacher stands upon the threshold of a new area. His role is not solely to dress down on Sunday mornings in
hickory-striped pants, cut-away coat, and top hat portraying saint-hood; and through the week taking on the duties of being the plumber, custodian, taxi-cab driver, grocery boy, and yard man in the community. The role of the Black Preacher is to lead black people--both in and out of his parish--into a new kind of realization of self-security and of self-confidence. The Black Preacher should have the potential to move our humanity from one level of being to another, a vertical impact on our existence that will effect an upward shift in our quality of being human. His message should be of such as to alert Black people of the urgency of the need of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and its application to a sin-sick Nation.

We are aware that the Black Preacher, as well as others, is caught up in a social revolution. By virtue of his status he strives to make real a democratic society in which black people may be able to achieve in the social, political, and economical world. The Black Preacher participates in freedom riding, sit-ins, and freedom-marching in an attempt to stabilize the unstable. He is the instrument usable unto God for the purpose of erasing hatred, despair, darkness, fear and evil from the face of our nation. As the Black Preacher leads his congregation into the attitude of worship, it is not only a time of singing, fellowship and preaching; but an experience of adoration and praise toward God. In the proclamation of the Gospel, the Black Preacher must help every Christian to discover God's special
mission for his life. A man's daily occupation, his leisure, his period of rest, his direct services to the local church, needs interpretation, for the true church continues seven days a week in whatever the people of God are doing. A new sensitivity to the will of God must be sharpened. The Black Preacher must be the shepherd promoting the activities of the church. The church facilities must be carefully utilized in serving the practical needs of the people. Special projects should be undertaken to serve the immediate needs of the neighborhood. The governing concern in the extension of the church program must be the goal of the abundant life. But, it must go beyond the fellowship. Our people need to be trained to go out and witness for Christ. The people must be given the responsibility of going out and bringing in men and women, not just to special programs, but to find God in Jesus Christ. In the barber shop, on the job, over the telephone, and on the street corner, the layman can multiply the power of preaching. There are periods of crises when the local church should go all out with the Black Preacher in the lead. The church must go all out in defense of truth, justice, and the protection of the rights of the most insignificant individual. The church must assist in mending, healing, and reconciliation. The church must feed those who are hungry, clothe those who are naked, free those who are held in captivity.
We are reminded of the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a Black Baptist preacher, who took to the streets in 1955 and opened a new chapter in the battle for deliverance. Mixing Ghandian tactics of non-violent direct action with the Christian love ethic, King applied mass power to the restricted gates of democracy. Never before had the Afro-American Church been so directly involved in social deliverance. He hurled a challenge at the hypocrisy of the organized church that will continue even where his name is not known. His whole message of deliverance was centered around a social gospel of up-grading poor housing, the uneducated and the under-educated, and better job opportunities for Black people. These, also, are some of the areas in which the Church must involve itself. The Church, under the leadership of the Black Preacher, must seek now to regain its radiance of hope. It must, by precept and example, embrace a complete concern for the personal and social aspects of mankind. Now, let us turn our attention to interpret under separate sub-headings each of the Black pastors' roles in his multilateral capacity.
III. THE ROLES OF THE BLACK PREACHER

There is no doubt that the Black Preacher is the head of his church. He is the chief staff person and, in some churches, the only professionally employed person. It is expected of him that he will be able to carry the church forward. He must be the guiding personality in the congregation. The Black Preacher's administrative role opens up channels for his ministry to the people. As he directs the members in planning and carrying out the program, many opportunities are presented for ministering to the religious needs of groups and individuals. The contacts, the meetings, the classes, all the face-to-face encounters contain numerous ministering opportunities. Some Black Preachers have answered the call to the ministry because they liked and wanted to help people. Those without these characteristics are mostly in the pastorate and tend to abandon it.

The Black Preacher can be strengthened in appreciation of his administrative role if he can be helped to see their creative possibilities. Good administration creates or enhances desirable values
and outcomes for the members of the black church. Disvalues may be created when administration is poorly or carelessly done (e.g., starting meetings late can discourage some of the most effective people from coming at another time, vagueness about the agenda creates disorder in the people's minds and often in the progress of the meetings, and failure to plan results in drifting). It, therefore, behooves the preacher in charge, and all of those associated with him, to give themselves to good planning and wise execution of the plans. The end results may be persons and groups are strengthened in abilities, attitudes, habits, fellowship, and spiritual understanding and dedication. The black church is struggling to survive in a racist society of which the white church composes a dominant part. The record of the past, recent, or distant, holds no special comfort for this moment, except that that record suggests that there is in our midst a viable, stable, vehicle that can be successfully utilized. It will not come by praying and preaching and singing alone. It must come by employing the instruments, skills and expertise of the administrative body under the direction of its Black Preacher to make more effective our witness that we are, indeed, sons and daughters of the Father. The Black Preacher's administrative roles are plural in number. When his various administrative duties are listed and grouped into meaningful classifications, the many roles begin to come
clear. The following is a list of these administrative roles together with a brief discussion of each:

1. The Black Pastor as Organizer:

   The Black Pastor as an organizer must be able to form and maintain the organization of the church. "He must possess the organizational skills necessary for setting up organizations or, rather, for guiding his congregation in the processes of organizing and re-organizing. This involves the ability to understand personal relationships and use them constructively."\(^2\) He must have the ability to capture new ideas and put them into action. He must know how to develop and impart them so that they will be understood and accepted. He cannot dogmatically insist on the acceptance of his own ideas entirely, but he must be alert for their reformulation through discussion with the proper bodies.

2. The Black Pastor as Director:

   He is the leader of his flock; therefore, he must guide or direct the people of the church in planning their organization and program and putting it into action. He is the person to whom the sheep turns for guidance. Sometimes our ego is fed by an amount of attention second only to that in preaching. The development of self-pride and over-bearing self-assurance becomes dominant. Yet, there must be someone to whom the people can turn for needed directions and answers to problems and questions. There are some of us bubbling over with an extra amount of energy and enthusiasm to move our congregations forward. However, there is an ever-present danger that we will push too fast and too hard for improvements and high-level performance by those working with us. We have an ideal in mind and may pursue it too vigorously for our church workers who do not understand either the ideal or the need. One writer warns that:

   "The failure to recognize that administration is the art of the feasible may lead to the other extreme in which too much is undertaken too quickly. Problem-solving is a

matter of undoing history and usually there is too much history to undo it all at one time. The great trouble of history to the administrator is that it is inexorable and will repeat effects if the causes are not changes. This means that the administrator must change the why's before he can change the ways of an organization. The rate of speed is only one of the two dimensions of the change which the administrator must observe. The extremist in organization must often violate both if he violates either. One of the toughest aspects of problem-solving is how far to go. Because the administrator must carry out his function within the framework of other peoples abilities and deficiencies, he needs more than ordinary patience and toleration.”

3. The Black Pastor as Recruiter:

"It is necessary for the Black pastor to lead in finding and securing the acceptance of people to fill the many places of responsibility in the church. He must match people and positions with abilities, and not because of likes and dislikes, or because of the extra five dollars slipped into his hands, or the favor rendered to him on some occasion. He must find those within the congregation who are developing, or may be developed for useful places of service." 4

4. The Black Pastor as Teacher:

It is the role of the Black pastor to develop his people in specific leadership abilities. This is done by teaching functions. The teachings may be carried out more or less formally in groups or classes. "There is a learning-by-doing process in which the pastor gives the workers instructions and guidance in their roles." 5 He may teach theological significance and religious relevance of the work which the church member is doing and this gives it a wider dimension in his mind. His teachings may reveal that the black church must remain a spiritual center to keep alive the hopes of the black community. The black church must deal centrally with the bread and potato issues of our community; jobs, better educational facilities for black people, the importance of voting,


4 Williamson, op. cit., p. 37.

5 Ibid., p. 38.
mobilization for selective patronage, etc. His teachings may
give insight that the black church must lead black people into
becoming mobilized and organized in the political economics,
as well as the social arena. His teachings may point out the
problems that the black churches face in attempting to change
the status quo and to acquire power to participate meaningfully
in developing and managing new structures of their own. His
teachings should give insight to the I-self and I-thou relation-
ships. The "love yourself" doctrine will have to engender and
sustain a "selffulness" unlike it has done before. And "love
your neighbor" will have to mean something more than a
humiliating tolerance of man's inhumanity to man. It is our
task to ascertain, through Jesus Christ, what God is saying
about the "what" and "how" of the ways of mankind in this
world.

Through the efforts of the black pastor, black people
should come to realize that life's humanism is not one in the
classical sense whereby faith is in man's inherent abilities to
realize sublime purposes; for from man as man has not come
the salient belief that the human race is beyond the frailties of
injustice, oppression, suppression, and hatred. With this in
mind, we become humanistic enough to know the problem is of
man, and the solution will be found in what man can become.

5. The Black Pastor as Counselor:

This, too, is a part of administration and is closely re-
lated to the teaching role. "The pastor has ministering functions
to perform in relation to the needs arising out of the roles of the
officers and leaders and to other personal needs of his congre-
gation which are discovered as they work with him in the church's
program."6 Not only should the black pastor's congregation be
counseled along these lines, but also on the moral laws of our
nation. We must be reminded of the passing of systems that were
born in injustice, nurtured in inequality, and reared in exploita-
tion. The black pastor must bring to the minds of his people
that life is inter-related. All men are caught in an inescapable
network of mutuality, and tied in a single garment of destiny.
Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Black
people in black churches are so close and, yet, so far apart.

6bid., p. 38.
But, by recognizing that the house that is divided cannot stand, we may possibly come together in brotherly love and achieve our humanities full stature.

6. The Black Pastor as Preacher:

As was pointed out heretofore, traditionally this role was that of an emotion-arousing type of orator. There was no emphasis placed on doctrine, content ethics, or Christian teachings. The black preacher depended upon the emotions of his preaching in order to make up for his lack of wider knowledge. He laid stress upon doctrinal or emotional specialties. The untrained black pastor paid little attention to the daily needs and problems of his people. He often made the first half of his message a reading of some sermons from a book. He gave the intellectual part from the sermon book, and made up the difference of the first part by offering a hodge-podge of emotionalism for Aunt Jane. His message was a "pie in the sky". It was a message of the better life to come after one had crossed over Jordan. His ego was uplifted to see his people climb the pews and walk the benches. Today the climate is different. The times have changed. People have changed. Black people no longer want a message revealed to them of what is to be obtained on the other side. Black congregations now want a message of relevance for their times. The black congregations want the black preacher to articulate to them about a God that can make possible to them some pie here on this earth. Black people want to hear a message that informs them of the conditions upon which mankind may enter into a genuinely human relationship. They want to hear a message which helps to develop, in particular, a faith and confidence that will mode the fabric of human relationship. They want to hear a message that will guide them in an experience which will enable them to accomplish goals and purposes. Black people also want messages that inform them of poverty programs, economic compensation, and their opportunities in this pluralistic society which has not materialized. These are the things that the black pastor of today must address himself to. His Gospel must speak true, authentic words for the oppressed, the down-trodden, the deprived, the captives, the poor, the rich, the illiterate, as well as to the intellect.

The hostile this-moment worldliness is a belief that life is to be realized at any cost to the self in the circumstances of the present. Thus, here is the Christian paradox: through the Gospel we have to see Jesus as a truth relevant to humanity's need to rise
higher than it is. The Gospel to be preached to us, in my opinion, is a Gospel to save the humanity of Black folk. Therefore, the black preacher's message must have within its content something more than that which causes his people to enter in a foot-patting, hand-clapping, highly emotional, ecstatic, other-worldly experience, but also a content which serves to balance the life of God's people.
CONCLUSION

It is not the purpose of this paper to play down the achievements of the stereotype Black pastor or the more contemporary Black pastor. This paper, rather, deals with the Black pastor as he came out of lowly conditions; slavery, comparative ignorance, poverty, social proscription, and segregation. From many of our Black preachers came scholars, authors, poets, hymn-writers, orators, social service organizers, college presidents, ambassadors to foreign nations, members of the state legislatures, constitutional conventions, and the United States Congress, as well as spiritual leaders of their people. Surely we are aware of how they fought for a better life, often against bitter odds; how they pioneered against slavery and segregation, and for active brotherhood, beginning as far back as a century and a half ago; how, in their interpretation of Christianity, they stressed the second "Great Commandment" of Jesus, and how they developed the first nationwide leadership from within Black people who struggled and still struggle to be free. These men conducted revivals, built churches and schools, organized colleges, inspired "race pride", and condemned and discouraged race hate.
Each of us would undoubtedly like to make an impact as time flashes forth its panorama of history. Certainly, some are chosen to make this impression more than others. I believe that the Black pastor is one of the chosen ones. One may ask the question: What impression does he make? He is many things to many different people. To the youngest of babies in his congregation, he is the firm hand held over him at the time of dedication. To the Sunday School children, he is the word of authority on difficult questions of the Bible. To the young adult, he is the counsel to seek when one wishes to get married. He is a source of inspiration on Sunday morning, and the servant of God, who shares the communion table with all. To the members of countless church groups, he is an ever-present source of information and guidance at an endless string of meetings. To the sick, he is a word of comfort in the loneliness of a hospital room. To the needy, he is a source of relief in an uphill struggle with life. To the elderly, he is a link with the past. Most of all, he is "a Disciple of Christ", sharing his message with those he touches, and in the process, leaving his impression upon the fleeting pages of history.

It makes me feel good to know that the Black preacher has risen to greater heights in his preparation to serve mankind. For the most part, Black preachers are now able to wrestle with Kant,
Hamilton, and Reid--masters in metaphysical thought. He is able to rationalize with Schleiermacher and reason with Tillich, Niebuhr and Brunner.

Looking forward, through the telescope of time, we can envision the zeal of the Black preacher becoming greater as he continues to build to the glory of God. As we gaze in gratitude, and rejoice over our heritage, may we take fresh courage and new inspiration to keep building in the hearts and lives of not only Black people, but people everywhere that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself and has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation.
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