7-1-2015

The social activism and theology of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.

Lauren D. Brisbon
Clark Atlanta University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.auctr.edu/dissertations
Part of the African American Studies Commons, History Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in ETD Collection for AUC Robert W. Woodruff Library by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center. For more information, please contact cwiseman@aucr.edu.
This dissertation examines a need for black theology and its impact on social activism in the theological community in the United States. Black theology is a necessary component in the work of a theologian. In this research, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.'s social activism is examined within the context of black theology. Based on this study, black theology provides a theological framework for theologians to follow to become social agents in their community.

In the 1960s, a group of radical, African-American clergy interpreted Christianity from the black American struggle perspective as it relates to freedom in America. Black theology includes three contexts: "the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, largely associated with Martin Luther King, Jr.; the publication of Joseph Washington’s
book, *Black Religion* (1964); and the rise of the Black Power movement, strongly influenced by Malcolm X’s philosophy of black nationalism.”

An examination of the theology of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., provides evidence that black theology is a viable theology of liberation in the work of social activism. A growing number of theologians are subscribing to prosperity theology. The most popular venues that subscribe to prosperity theology are megachurches. Prosperity theology is associated with the following:

First, God grants all his faithful followers physical health and financial prosperity; second, believers claim their divine right to wealth and health through positive confession, financial offerings; third, the persistent faith that God must fulfill his promises exists; and fourth, faith preachers often teach that God can only release his gifts when human beings fully submit to his will, even when the demanded course of action contradicts secular logic.

If more African-American theologians subscribe to black theology, pastors and their congregants would be in a better position to advocate for their rights and for the rights of others. Ultimately, this research will prompt African-American theologians to revisit black theology and to use it in their work as an instrument of social protest.

---


THE SOCIAL ACTIVISM AND THEOLOGY OF
ADAM CLAYTON POWELL, JR.

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY
LAUREN D. BRISBON

HUMANITIES DOCTORAL PROGRAM AND
DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES,
AFRICANA WOMEN’S STUDIES, AND HISTORY

ATLANTA, GEORGIA
JULY 2015
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank God for giving me the ability to pursue my true calling and to be a blessing to others. I know with God that all things are possible. To my parents, Ms. Emily Freeman Brisbon and Rev. Dr. David A. Brisbon, thank you for all of your love, prayers, and support. You have been my inspiration. To my brother, Kerry D. Brisbon, I want to thank you for your encouragement and prayers.

Thanks to the members of my dissertation committee: Dr. Stephanie Y. Evans, Dr. Charmayne Patterson, and Dr. Aubrey Underwood. You gave me the inspiration and guidance that I needed to become a good scholar. To Dr. Viktor Osinubi, thank you for mentoring me and advising me over the past four years. To Dr. Marcellus Barksdale, Dr. Ernestine Pickens-Glass, and the Late Dr. Vincent Harding, thank you for your encouragement and advice during my academic journey. I would like to thank the Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives Ministry for their generosity in accommodating my research needs. I am blessed to have so many caring family members and friends who have been my support system. To Ms. Rhoda Dingle, the Late Ms. Sylvia Mickens, and Dr. Kenneth Roberts, thank you for always encouraging me to stay focused. Lastly, thanks to my professors and fellow classmates at Clark Atlanta University for your encouragement and support.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** ................................................................. iii

**CHAPTER 1 BLACK THEOLOGY AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM** ................. 1

- Research Questions ................................................................. 2
- Chapter Organization ............................................................... 3
- Research Methodology .............................................................. 4

**CHAPTER 2 THE IMPACT OF BLACK THEOLOGY** ......................... 40

- Proponents of Black Theology .................................................. 49
- Critics of Black Theology .......................................................... 61

**CHAPTER 3 FIGHTING ADAM** .................................................... 84

- The Theology of Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. ............................... 85
- The Theology of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. ............................... 122
- Political Activism of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. ......................... 146

**CHAPTER 4 ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF BLACK THEOLOGY ON POWELL’S SERMONS AND SPEECHES** .......................... 205

- Powell’s Sermons ................................................................. 206
- Powell’s Speeches ................................................................. 218

**CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION** ......................................................... 233

- Social Implications of Powell’s Theology .................................. 234

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** ........................................................................... 262
CHAPTER 1
BLACK THEOLOGY AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM

In this study, the interrelationship of social activism and the theology of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., played a significant role in advocating civil rights for African Americans. Specifically, this work explores the evolution of Powell’s theology as it relates to his ministry and his political activism. This work establishes Powell as the father of black theology and examines the impact of his theology on his social activism.

Based on this research, theologians may be more inclined to subscribe to black theology as a mechanism to hone their social activism in their communities. Presently, with poor social conditions mounting in communities throughout the United States, a solution is needed to restore justice. The church and state are inextricably connected. By subscribing to black theology, theologians are able to develop a militant stance to withstand the obstacles that they encounter in fighting for justice and leading individuals to salvation.

Many theologians are eager to get media attention or are led into a lifestyle of self-indulgence. The time has come for theologians to become accountable to their calling and to their communities. Powell is used as an example of an African-American theologian who successfully subscribed to black theology, strategically, as a means to gain the investment of African Americans in the struggle for equality. Black theologians should revisit black theology in an effort to advocate for the oppressed community.
Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions regarding black theology's impact on social activism and on civil rights:

1) How did Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.'s theology impact his social activism?

2) How did Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. use black theology to empower African Americans in advocating for their Civil Rights Movement?

3) How did black theology empower Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.?

4) What are the social implications of his theology?

In supporting black theology, this study answers the aforementioned questions and provides applicability to the relevance of black theology as an instrument of protest in advocating for civil rights. Chapter two provides an answer to question three. It presents a discussion on the utility of black theology from distinguished scholars. This chapter demonstrates how black theology empowers theologians in their ministry and in their social activism.

In chapters three and four provide an answer for questions one, two, and three. These chapters reveal how black theology impacted Powell’s theology and his social activism. Chapter five provides an answer for question four. This chapter describes Powell’s legacy and the relevance of black theology today, particularly at Abyssinian Baptist Church.
Chapter Organization

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter one describes the research methodology in this study. Moreover, it defines social activism and black theology. It explores how black theology impacts a theologian’s work in social activism. Chapter two is a literature review, which explores the various views by some theologians on the subject of black theology. This chapter surveys the secondary research that identifies key elements, which substantiates the existence and the need for black theology.

Chapter three examines black theology’s impact on the social activism of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. The beginning of the chapter explores the theology of Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. It is important to start with a discussion on Powell, Sr.’s theology, since his theology heavily influenced the theology of his son, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. It explains how Powell, Sr. provided the foundation for social activism at Abyssinian Baptist Church. Equally important, it explores Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.’s life as a preacher and civil rights activist. It is important to examine the various roles of Powell and how these roles allowed him to use the precepts of black theology to transform his work in social activism.

Chapter four analyzes some of Powell’s most memorable sermons and speeches within the framework of black theology. Chapter five discusses Powell’s theology and the impact of his legacy on Abyssinian Baptist Church. It also includes the relevance of black theology in today’s society.
Research Methodology

From a historical perspective, this research contributes to the ongoing research in social activism and theology. Within the area of historiography, this dissertation is a study in theology, ethnohistory, and social history. This research is a combination of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources in this research were collected from the following archives: the Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives in Harlem, New York; the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, New York; the Martin Luther King, Jr. Collection at the Robert W. Woodruff Library at the Atlanta University Center in Atlanta, Georgia; and the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana.

During a visit to the Martin Luther King, Jr. Collection at the Robert W. Woodruff Library, correspondence was collected between Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and Martin Luther King, Jr. While visiting the Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives, pertinent information was extracted on Powell from his personal papers in the collection. The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and the Amistad Research Center provided information on the social activism and the personal life of Powell. In addition to using primary sources, information was collected from the following databases: JSTOR – the Journal Project; Black Freedom Struggle in the 20th Century: Records and Personal Papers; the Black Studies Center; and the African American Newspapers, 1827-1998.
In each chapter, the approach was to identify themes that described the use of black theology in social activism. The impact of black theology provided an introduction to the discussion of the utility of black theology in society. Cases studies are presented in the succeeding chapters on the impact of black theology of Powell’s social activism and an analysis of his application of black theology.

The methodology for this dissertation was developed from James H. Cone’s theological approach to black theology. James H. Cone is Charles A. Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary, New York. He has authored numerous articles and books. In 1964, he completed his Ph.D. in Systematic Theology from Northwestern University. With an understanding of the Civil Rights Movement, he focused his work on the theological meaning of racism and the black struggle for justice in America. His goal was to connect the political struggles of African Americans to God’s righteousness.¹ According to Cone; “It was clear to me that what was needed was a fresh start in theology, a new way of doing it that would arise out of the black struggle for justice and in no way would be dependent upon the approval of white academics in religion.”²


Cone states that Christian theology is a theology of liberation. He defines this theology as “rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ.” He uses three criteria in substantiating black theology as a liberation theology. First, God elected Israel to be God’s people. Second, Israelite history revealed that God was concerned about the oppressed in Israel. Third, in the New Testament, Jesus reaffirmed the theme of liberation.

Furthermore, Cone indicates that the task of black theology “is to analyze the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in light of oppressed blacks so they will see the gospel as inseparable from their humiliated condition.” Because it centers on Jesus Christ, black theology is a Christian theology. In chapters three and four, the framework of black theology is applied to areas of social activism from a theologian’s perspective.

I became interested in social activism in the African-American church while living in New York City a few years ago. I had the privilege of attending Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York, which was once under the pastorate of Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. It was at Abyssinian that I learned about Powell’s legacy in civil rights for African Americans. Long after Powell’s death, the church continues to embrace a legacy of social activism.

---

3 Ibid., 1.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 5.
During my visits to Abyssinian, I often wondered why Powell’s sermons and speeches on civil rights were so effective in galvanizing his congregation and the people of Harlem to unite in fighting discrimination against blacks in New York. Because of my interest in the history of black religion, I spoke to a member of the archives ministry at the church about what was the impetus behind Powell’s soul-stirring sermons on civil rights. She revealed that Powell seriously subscribed to black theology, and of course, at the time, I knew very little about this theological framework. She described black theology as being the theology of liberation for African Americans, which offered them hope for freedom from white hegemony in the United States. Specifically, black theology focused on the oppressed community.

Essentially, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., was one of the most prominent figures in civil rights who passionately engaged in promoting justice for African Americans. In March 1957 at Ghana’s independence ceremony, Martin Luther King, Jr. solidified Powell as being a top leader in civil rights in the following statement: “It was a beautiful experience to see some of the leading persons on the scene of civil rights in America on hand: to my left was Charles Diggs, to my right were Adam Powell and Ralph Bunche.”6 Attending the Ghanaian celebration, Powell endorsed black pride, and his presence made a statement against colonialism as well as racism.

---

In black theology, some of the tenets from Pan-Africanism and black nationalism resonate in the framework of this theology. Like Pan-Africanism and black nationalism, black theology embraces black pride and self-empowerment. Cone notes that “from the very beginning, black theology has been influenced by a world perspective as defined by Henry M. Turner, Marcus Garvey, and the Pan-Africanism inaugurated in the life and work of W.E.B. Du Bois...This global perspective in black theology enlarges our vision regarding the process of liberation.”\(^7\) Black liberation and black religion are inextricably connected. Cone states that “the influence of Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr., demonstrates the role of religion in the black community.”\(^8\)

Logically, since my research interest focuses on theological social activism in the African-American community, Powell is a superb exemplar of an adherent of black theology for other theologians to follow in cultivating their work in social activism. Successfully, he utilized black theology in his work in social activism to help liberate African Americans from racism and discrimination. Furthermore, black theology provided a framework for Powell in developing strategies that were implemented in his work in social activism. Successfully, Powell utilized the black church as a protest instrument in advocating for civil rights for African Americans. This research reveals

\(^7\) Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 49.

\(^8\) Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 59.
how black theology impacted Powell's social activism. Lessons learned from this research is intended to inspire today's theologians to use black theology as a methodological framework in their work in social activism.

What is Activism?

Activism has played an integral role in abolishing slavery, advocating equality for women, promoting equality for women, challenging racism, and a variety of other significant issues. Activism has existed in every type of political structure. Activists normally challenge policies and practices in an effort to accomplish a social goal. The most popular form of activism is a public protest, such as a mass meeting, a rally, or a march.

Respectively, nonviolent action can be viewed from three perspectives. First, methods of protest and persuasion, such as speeches, picketing, and marches, must exceed beyond conventional behavior to be considered as nonviolent actions. Second, nonviolent action involves noncooperation, such as disobeying social customs and a variety of strikes. Third, intervention includes sit-ins, nonviolent occupations, and establishing alternative economic and political institutions. Violent action is considered as another option which includes torture, imprisonment, and other forms of brutal actions.

---


10 Ibid., 19-20.
Conventional violent action is generally executed by military and police forces.

Normally, violent activism is performed by individuals without authority such as freedom fighters or terrorists. Most often, this type of activism is referred to as armed struggle rather than activism. Activism continues to evolve along with political opportunity and developments in technology. 11

During the modern Civil Rights Movement, the practice of protest used explicitly was civil disobedience. The theory of civil disobedience has a foundation in Christian theology. Initially, it appeared in 17th century England with the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). Ideas were derived from the group that allowed for the development of this concept. Europeans endorsed the belief that God ordained the civil government based on the precepts of Christianity. Therefore, humans had an obligation to respect, obey, and preserve it. Originating from Lutheranism and reformed Calvinism, if God’s laws and human laws were not compatible, then humans were not obligated to obey ungodly civil laws. 12 Moreover, civil disobedience is disobedience of the law.

According to Professor Rex Martin, “Civil disobedience is the deliberate and public violation of the command of an authorized and accepted political superior on the ground that a decree is unjust, immoral, unconstitutional, and contrary to good public policy.”13

11 Ibid., 20-21.


Since the pioneering of civil disobedience by the Quakers, this type of civil dissent has served as an exemplar for individuals and groups worldwide. Three non-Quaker figures are regarded as being the leading proponents of civil disobedience, which include Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948), and Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968).14 Henry David Thoreau, the founder of civil disobedience, promoted ideas that influenced subsequent activists; however, Thoreau did not always practice disobedience. In disobeying laws, his actions did not always comply with the criteria for civil disobedience as advocated by Gandhi and King. Often, he practiced resistance that was not respectful of the government or peacefully executed.15 Indisputably, it can be stated that “Thoreau, Gandhi, and King rested the legitimacy of their civil disobedience on an appeal to moral principle.”16

Mohandas Gandhi was one of the most influential practitioners of civil disobedience. His philosophy was evolved from several influences: “the work of Thoreau and Christian anarchist Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910); and the New Testament, specifically, the Sermon on the Mount. Interwoven with these were attitudes about nonviolence he inherited from Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism.”17 His principle of

14 Calvert, 338.

15 Ibid.


17 Calvert, 338.
resistance was known as satyagraha, which is defined as “firmness in truth.” In advocating for India’s freedom from British rule, he borrowed concepts from the aforementioned philosophers and systems. He denounced the characteristics of civil disobedience that did not conform to the most extreme type of civil disobedience. By practicing civil disobedience, Gandhi helped India to gain its independence from Britain.\textsuperscript{18}

The most renowned American who practiced civil disobedience was Martin Luther King, Jr., leader of the modern Civil Rights Movement. King was an adherent of Thoreau, Gandhi, and Christian theology.\textsuperscript{19} Since King embraced satyagraha, he believed that Gandhi’s philosophy on civil disobedience “was the only moral and practical way for oppressed people to struggle against social injustice.”\textsuperscript{20} Moreover, he adhered to the philosophy of Quakers Richard Gregg (1885-1974) and Bayard Rustin (1912-1987). King, a Baptist preacher, demonstrated how to conduct protesting peacefully.\textsuperscript{21} Under the direction of Gandhi and King, “nonviolent movements [became] deliberate and often effective attempts to produce important political and social

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{21} Calvert, 338.
changes."\textsuperscript{22}

Civil disobedience is defined as "a nonviolent, public, submissive violation of unjust laws with the intent to educate and effect change."\textsuperscript{23} Because civil disobedience is nonviolent, it does not contribute harmful actions to individuals or to property. Disruptively, civil disobedience challenges social norms and established laws. In addition, the act must be for the public good and be conducted in a civil or public place. Individuals who engage in acts of civil disobedience must submit willingly to the penalties of the laws they intend to violate.\textsuperscript{24}

Civil disobedience occurs during the existence of a number of political provisions. First, a democratic element of the system must exist that permits individuals a voice in the legal system. Second, to be a legitimate protest, a sense of moral obligation to the constitution and government must exist. Third, a significant amount of the polity's stability must be present that will not disrupt the dissolution of the entire government.\textsuperscript{25} In examining civil disobedience, it "implies a general commitment to the political-legal system. This commitment may be expressed as a prima facie obligation to obey the law.


\textsuperscript{23} Calvert, 336.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 337.
Hence, in civil disobedience, the burden of proof lies with the agent to justify disobedience, and civil disobedients usually assume the role to provide a justification.\textsuperscript{26}

Advocates of civil disobedience assert that it is essential to the democratic process. First, it is the most direct method of participation in the governing process. Citizens are afforded the opportunity to comment directly on the laws, and civil disobedience displays the highest level of respect for the Constitution. Civil disobedience allows individuals to distinguish between what is legal and what is constitutional. Civil disobedience is situated at the continuum of resistance to government. Pacifistic nonresistance exists at one extreme, and the violent overthrow of government exists at the other extreme.\textsuperscript{27}

A History of Black Theologians’ Social Activism

According to historian C. Eric Lincoln, the black church was created out of slavery and oppression. Its existence was based on the determination of black Christians to become separate from white Christians, “whose cultural style and spiritual understanding made no provision for racial inclusiveness at a level acceptable to black people.”\textsuperscript{28} In 1898, W.E.B. Du Bois asserted that the Negro church was “the only social


\textsuperscript{27} Calvert, 337.

institution among the Negroes which started in the African forest and survived slavery” and that “under the leadership of the priest and medicine man” the church preserved the remnants of African tribal life.29

The black church served as a vanguard for the black community based on its prophetic role. The church addressed religious and spiritual needs of the black community. It encouraged political and social activism as well as provided a sanctuary against social injustices.30 The colonial and revolutionary periods provided the framework for black religion and the black church as well as the ability to develop the black church. During the antebellum period, blacks in the North received access to political institutions and legal protection. As a result, black religious associations and clergy were able to advocate for the abolishment of slavery and for racial equality. In the South, the slave system prohibited free and enslaved blacks from having access to the political system.31


31 Ibid., 61.
In the antebellum North, African-American churches were involved in abolitionist and proto-nationalist movements. In the North, the black church was divided on the issue of blacks becoming involved in the Civil War. African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church leaders initially urged blacks not to enlist with the Union forces because the war had little interest in gaining equality for blacks. After the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, President Lincoln reassured blacks that the war was for their best welfare. Thereafter, the AME Church endorsed the war, and on September 10, 1863, Henry McNeal Turner was appointed as the Union Army’s first black chaplain.

Throughout the war, black clergymen offered assistance to newly freed men, freed women, and also recruited members for their churches. Moreover, black churches believed that they were obligated to educate and socialize the former slaves. Southern churches facilitated both preaching and teaching. Additionally, in educating free blacks, black Methodists and Baptists started multiple universities. Church leaders began their

---


34 Ibid.
involvement in politics and justified their roles as being responsible to their members.35

During Reconstruction, 237 black clergymen were elected to local, state, and national positions.36 Churches provided meeting space for political gatherings, and consequently, church leadership was elected to elected offices in the government. In Reconstruction politics, black clergy played a pivotal role. Ministers used their churches as a political base. According to historian Eric Foner, "over 100 black ministers, from every denomination from AME to Primitive Baptist, were elected to legislative seats during Reconstruction."37

As Reconstruction ended, Jim Crow flourished in the South with the ruling of Plessy v. Ferguson (1896). African Americans and the black church encountered limited involvement in the political arena. As a result of racial violence in the South, many black churches were cautious in their approach to the “race problem,” and church leaders began


36 Ibid.

to adopt a philosophy of working diligently as the focus of the race. These clergy began to align with Booker T. Washington’s philosophy of accommodation. In addition to promoting Washington’s philosophy of accommodation, black clergy appealed to their white counterparts and southern governors to help promote race relations. Unfortunately, these appeals failed in improving race relations.

In combating Jim Crow, some preachers took a direct approach in confronting it. Sutton E. Griggs of Nashville’s East First Baptist Church used his pulpit to organize a streetcar boycott and to publicize incidents of police brutality. In addition, he participated in the Niagara Movement, which was the antecedent to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Nannie H. Burroughs worked to change the welfare of blacks and women. She urged blacks and black clergy to become affiliated with the NAACP, to teach history that

---


focused on racial pride, and to reassess gender roles in the church. Richard Henry Boyd, a founder of the National Baptist Convention of America, attacked Jim Crow by using his publishing house and his Sunday school books for racial uplift. The realities of Jim Crow led southern blacks to migrate to the North for better opportunities.41

The Great Migration contributed to an increase in the membership in the northern churches. These churches began to focus on social issues of the day. Abyssinian Baptist in Harlem, Olivet Baptist in Chicago, First Congregational in Atlanta, and many other churches provided day care, social activities, educational and unemployment services.42 Preachers like Reverdy C. Ransom (AME), Walter Hood (AMEX), and L.K. Williams (Baptist) maintained the active involvement of their churches in the overall development of black communities. Since their ministries were associated with the social gospel, they contended that “Christianity had social implications that required Christians to work toward the ending of poverty and racial discrimination.”43 Ransom urged the black church to apply the social implications of the gospel of Christ.44

---

43 Ibid., 12.
44 Ibid.
In 1917, Walter Rauschenbush, a Baptist pastor in New York, wrote *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. The social gospel was founded on the belief that love was the only genuine working principle of human society. It revealed “that the kingdom of evil has thrust love aside and employed force because love will support only a fraternal distribution of property and power, while force will support exploitation and oppression.” Consequently, many black churches created an array of social services including job training, libraries, basic education programs, and health-care programs.

During the mid-twentieth century, one of the most profound examples of the social gospel was demonstrated by Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., of Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City. According to historian Bettye Collier-Thomas, the social gospel movement in America applied the tenets of Christianity to critical secular problems, such as poverty, race, labor, and a variety of other social issues. The movement included individuals “who were anxious to inculcate commonly held religious beliefs and values while dispensing much-needed services and educational training.”

As a high-profile preacher and Harlem’s first black congressman, Powell advocated for the rights of African Americans and endorsed a model of social gospel that

---


47 Ibid., 88.
combined the Christian tradition with street wisdom. This type of social gospel was apparent in his often quoted line, "Keep the faith, baby." Powell used public protest strategies to secure employment for blacks in white-owned Harlem stores, advocate for improved healthcare, and maintain stability in a potentially volatile section of New York. Powell’s legacy also included being elected to city council and then to Congress in 1944. As a Congressman, he chaired the House Committee on Education and Labor in 1961. While chairing this committee, he produced legislation that improved the lives of Americans through educational and economic reform.

Preachers, such as Ransom and Powell, were inspired by the social gospel, which represented isolated programs “as opposed to large scale and more denominationally focused programs.” Prior to the Civil Rights Movement, many black churches were inadequate in providing leadership, vision, and resources essential for multi-leveled ministries. The Civil Rights Movement promoted collective cooperation on national issues relating to inequality. By participating in social transformation and political change, black churches and their leaders were able to hone their activist skills. In addition to participating in direct action social protest, “the black church also provided

---


49 Pinn, 12-13.

50 Ibid.
the ideological and theological underpinning for the movement.51

With the growth of industry, the South became urbanized, which permitted blacks to create stronger networks and acquire access to education.52 Because of the country’s involvement in World War II, blacks renewed their determination to fight Jim Crow. In addition, the Supreme Court reversed its earlier ruling that outlawed white primaries and restrictive covenants. In 1954, Brown v. Board of Education, legally abolished the original ruling in Plessy vs. Ferguson.53

During the Civil Rights Movement, religious institutions supplied vital organization resources for protest mobilization. In the words of historian Aldon Morris, “The black church served as the organizational hub of black life, providing the resources that – along with other indigenous groups and institutions – fostered collective protest against a system of white domination in the South.”54 Black churches have provided

---

51 Ibid.

52 McDaniel, 72-73.


information, organizational skills, and political stimuli. In particular, black churches were inextricably united to other sources of activism.55

The Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56, a nonviolent direct action protest, was not the first attempt for promoting social transformation. During the 1940s, Powell’s activism predated the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The arrest of Rosa Parks launched a boycott, and the Baptist Ministerial Alliance in Montgomery later known as the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) assumed the leadership of the movement. From the MIA’s work and its member churches, the struggle for equality expanded into a movement for civil rights across the United States.56

Under the guidance of Martin Luther King, Jr., the Civil Rights Movement endorsed Gandhi’s “truth-force” philosophy and the social gospel to present a revised agenda for social reform. This shift in the church’s priorities was represented by preachers. According to civil rights activist Jo Ann Robinson, “the ministers gave themselves, their time...and their leadership...which set examples for the laymen to follow. They gave us confidence, faith in ourselves, faith in them and their leadership, that helped the congregations to support the movement every foot of the way.”57

55 Harris, 86-87.

56 Pinn, 13.

Anthony Pinn, an African-American scholar, states that Robinson’s comment suggests that “the mission established by King and other prominent figures in the Civil Rights Movement required the active participation of congregations.” Congregations disseminated information, raised money, boycotted businesses, and continued to work in an effort to gain freedom.

Sunday services and mass meetings were instrumental in garnering the participation of black Christians. For example, King spoke about the role of the black church in the work of the Montgomery Bus Boycott:

A mass meeting was being held that night. There I asked all those who were willing to offer their cars to give us their names, addresses, telephones numbers, and the hours that they could drive, before leaving the meeting. The response was tremendous....The ministers agreed to go to their pulpits the following day and seek additional recruits. Again the response was tremendous. With the new additions, the number of cars swelled to about three hundred.

Black churches were a vital forum in providing information that helped to mold the political behavior of their congregants.

The black clergy’s political engagement played an essential role in the nation’s

---

58 Ibid., 14.
59 Ibid.
61 Pinn, 14.
urban political landscape. Their activism was not confined exclusively to civil rights, but particularly, many black urban clergy were committed to providing important social services to black communities. Activist women in the black church and the religious-affiliated black women's clubs provided kindergartens, recreation centers, health awareness, and religious and formal education for adults and youth.

In the current environment, much debate has surfaced about whether black churches have remained engaged in the social and political activism of black communities. In the early 1970s, theologian C. Eric Lincoln commented that "the opiate-driven Negro church that sociologist E. Franklin wrote about a decade earlier ... died an agonized death in the harsh turmoil of the 1960s." After the passage of the Voting

---


63 Ibid.


Rights Act of 1965 and the rise of black elected officials, black churches had an obligation to participate in electoral politics.66

Despite the influence of black liberation, a commitment to political and social activism by black religious institutions was not maintained. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya explain in their analysis of urban black churches in the post-civil rights era:

The present picture of black urban churches is a complicated, mixed picture of some effects of privatization among unchurched sectors of the black population, and the withdrawal of some black churches into the sphere of personal piety and religiosity; but there are a number of signs of the continuing tradition of activism and involvement in the political, economic, educational, and cultural aspects of black life among the majority of black clergy and churches.67

What is Black Theology and What is Its Purpose?

Black theology, a revolutionary liberation theology indigenous to the United States, originated in a shift in world order, particularly after World War II. After World War II, international dynamics promoted the dawn of the African-American Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. These movements

---


67 Ibid.
launched many other domestic human rights struggles for justice and provided the foundation for restructuring the theology of African-American churches and other faith communities. World War II was a turning point in history for African Americans. Many African Americans who served in the military during World War II experienced a sense of liberation from the Jim Crow laws of the United States. After serving their country, they believed that they were entitled to equal rights as citizens.

Being a broad movement, black theology encompasses a diversity of viewpoints and methods. Black theology is committed to challenging the systemic frameworks that affirm specific practices that ignore the claims of those who are marginalized. This process of seeking to change such frameworks and to assist the oppressed to be free is known as “liberation.”

During the postwar era, the United States governance gained stature as a champion of capitalism and democracy in the noncommunist world. Moreover, the postwar era had a profound effect on civil rights for blacks in the southern United States. Moreover, African Americans supported the ideology of liberation. According to historian Robin D.G. Kelley, most of the twentieth-century factions of the American Left

---


71 Hopkins, 9.
shared the political concept that blacks were an integral part of the class struggle. The American Left was founded in a society where slavery and free labor coexisted. The emerging Left understood the racial dilemma of blacks in America.\textsuperscript{72}

During this period, many African Americans were communist sympathizers, including Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. They concluded that a democratic form of government literally deprived them of their constitutional rights as citizens. For many African Americans, communism seemed to be the better political choice because it appeared to represent justice as well as equality.

The impact of global decolonization stimulated the black power challenge and the black church initiatives on civil rights.\textsuperscript{73} Black religion spearheaded the black liberation struggle, and civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP.\textsuperscript{74} Throughout history and presently, the African-American church has been instrumental in advocating civil rights for African Americans. Indisputably, black history contributed to the advent of black theology.

Other factors helped to nurture the Civil Rights and Black Power movements as well as the birth of black theology. One factor was the United States Supreme Court case, \textit{Brown v. Board of Education} (1954), which declared that separate facilities for

\begin{itemize}
  \item Robin D. G. Kelley, \textit{The Black Radical Imagination} (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 42.
  \item Hopkins, 10.
  \item Cecil Wayne Cone, \textit{The Identity Crisis in Black Theology}, rev. ed. (Nashville: AMEC, 2003), 65.
\end{itemize}
blacks and whites were unconstitutional. The Brown v. Board of Education decision emerged partly from a reassessment of the world theater by the United States government and its multinational corporations. The decision in this case provided an incentive for African Americans to advocate for full citizenship. Remarkably, the Brown decision brought awareness of inequality against blacks and played a crucial factor in the modern Civil Rights Movement. The next factor was the Marshall Plan. This post-World War II proposal allowed American multinational firms to penetrate Europe and helped to boost the American economy. Like most Americans, African Americans aspired to having a higher level of education and standard of living. Domestically, the international progress of white Americans prompted the impatience of African Americans in achieving their rights.

From its inception, black theology was viewed “as Christian theological reflection upon the black struggle for justice and liberation, strongly influenced by the life of Martin Luther King, Jr.” When King and other black theologians began to apply the Christian gospel to the struggle for racial equality in the American society, the majority of white churches and their theologians denied that this relationship existed.

---

75 Hopkins, 11.


77 Hopkins, 11.

Unfortunately, King was not accepted by many white American theologians, particularly when he initiated the Civil Rights Movement in conjunction with the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955. King closely examined biblical passages and extracted the true intent of those passages to promote his message of nonviolence in the fight for justice.

Many black theologians who were involved in the conception of black theology also participated in the Civil Rights Movement, including demonstrations led by Martin Luther King, Jr. Compared to other theological movements, black theology did not originate in a seminary. Black theology was developed in the context of the struggle of African Americans for racial justice, which was initiated in the African-American churches and was identified with "civil rights organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the National Conference of Black Churchmen (NCBC), the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO), and many African-American caucuses in white churches." Reasonably, during this time, black theology would not have originated in American seminaries because most of the seminaries were predominantly operated by whites. Therefore, it was imperative for African Americans to develop their own theology.

Although black theology emerged out of the Civil Rights Movement and in response to the publication of Joseph Washington's *Black Religion*, the Civil Rights

---

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid., 6-7.
Movement and Booker T. Washington’s articulation of black religion’s uniqueness did not solely define the rhetoric and the essential meaning of black theology.\textsuperscript{81} Rather, black theology and the politics that established its organizational associations were defined by the secular emergence of black power.\textsuperscript{82} Since black theology was considered to be a rather militant theology, its conception would likely have roots in a secular segment of society, but it does include a biblical interpretation. The black mood that extends from black power and black theology recognizes “that black identity must be defined in terms of its African heritage rather than in terms of European enslavement.”\textsuperscript{83}

In 1964, an African-American scholar, Joseph Washington wrote \textit{Black Religion} to address “the hegemony of integration in black-white relationships in America.”\textsuperscript{84} In the Washington’s view, “there [is] a unique black culture, a distinctive black religion that can be placed alongside Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism, and secularism, black religion is not identical with white Protestantism or any other expression of Euro-

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 31-32.
\item \textsuperscript{84} Cone, \textit{For My People}, 8.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
American Christianity."85 His book prompted black theologians to seriously consider adopting a theology that addressed the spiritual needs of black Americans.

According to historian Peniel Joseph, the term "black power" was popularized by Stokely Carmichael in Greenwood, Mississippi in June 1966 where civil rights leaders led a demonstration to the state capitol as a result of activist James Meredith being shot on his one-man "march against fear." Previously, Richard Wright used the term in his 1954 nonfiction exposition about the liberation of the West African Gold Coast. In addition, activist Paul Robeson used "Negro Power" during the 1950s, and Powell used the term in early 1966. In general, their use of the phrase defined black political power. It was determined that "black power defined a movement for racial solidarity, cultural pride, and self-determination. Its urgent rhetoric, militant posture, and defiant tone made the phrase a clarion call for an increasingly revolutionary age."86 Black power evolved into black activism and manifested itself as an introduction to black liberation.87

---

85 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
Black power meant declaring African-American freedom. Members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), including Stokely Carmichael, believed that African Americans needed to take an extremely aggressive approach to advocate for their civil rights. They began to condemn the strategies of nonviolence used in the Civil Rights Movement, which they felt were antiquated. Black power acknowledged black freedom when the victims of white racism destroyed their dignity. For many blacks and whites, the black power slogan connoted anti-white sentiment. The essence of this slogan was considered to be radical and militant.

In response to the Black Power movement, a group of African-American theologians, members of the National Committee of Black Churchmen, issued the following theological statement in July 1966, which linked black religion to black power:

As black men who were long ago forced out of the white church to create and to wield “Black Power,” we fail to understand the emotional quality of the outcry of some clergy against the use of the term today. It is not enough to answer that “integration” is the solution. For it is precisely the nature of the operation of power under some forms of integration which is being challenged...without capacity to participate with power – i.e., to have some organized political and economic strength to really influence people with whom one interacts – integration is not meaningful....We regard as sheer hypocrisy or as a blind and dangerous illusion the view that opposes love to power, but what love opposes is precisely the misuse and abuse of power, not power itself. So long as white

---

churchmen continue to moralize and misinterpret Christian love, so long will justice continue to be subverted in this land.89

The black theologian’s statement on black power created the spiritual foundation for black theology. In 1969, the term was coined by James Cone in Black Theology and Black Power.90 In 1971, most seminaries began accepting black theology as a legitimate theological discipline, and the momentum of the movement was continued with the publication of Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black theology by J. Deotis Roberts.91

While the civil rights initiatives linked Christianity with justice and religious militancy, the Black Power movement centered the cultural identity of blackness at the center of justice for African Americans. Although the civil rights efforts were limited to a specific geographic region, black power expanded to every region of the country.92 Virtually, black power was an instrument that was used in the struggle for racial uplift and for freedom.

For certain groups of African-American theologians, the goals of black power represented the essence of being a Christian. Following Malcolm X’s legacy, “secular”

---


92 Hopkins, 13.
black power advocates viewed Christianity as being the white man’s religion. In response, black theology combined Christianity and “the radical black self-reliance of the black power advocates with the freedom message of civil rights.” In essence, black theology involved the process of creating a theology from an oppressed people’s perspective. It interpreted the gospel of Jesus Christ from a viewpoint of historical and contemporary racism. Black theology’s message paralleled the African-American struggle with the gospel. African-American theologians wanted to create a theology that was pertinent to the African-American experience and not from the traditional Christian theological perspective.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, liberation was the goal for African Americans who suffered oppression as a result of racism. Because liberation related to the African-American community, it consisted of political, social, and economic empowerment. In addition, it emphasized self-affirmation and self-determination for African Americans. In *Introducing Black Liberation*, Dwight N. Hopkins asserts “that black theology can be broadly understood as the self-conscious attempt to undertake rational and disciplined conversation about God and God’s relationship to African-American people in the world,

93 Ibid.


95 Ibid., 14-15.
looking at the past and the present, and imagining the future." \(^96\) Black theology focuses on the understanding that blackness consisted of "suffering, struggle, marginalization, and the oppression of black people." \(^97\) It is designed to address the spiritual needs of the African-American community, which no other theology accomplishes.

Black power and the Christian gospel were not easily united. Black power adherents did not accept Christianity because they considered it to be the white man's religion. Black power received opposition from most Christians, since it was in opposition of the Christian faith. Consequently, black power adherents de-Christianized the African-American fight for justice by promoting black separatism and self-defense. The Civil Rights Movement remained Christian focused as long as Martin Luther King emphasized love, nonviolence, and integration as vital components of the movement. When many African Americans began to endorse Malcolm X’s philosophy, black power became "the introduction of a radicalization that excluded Christianity." \(^98\) On the other hand, black theology attempted to combine Christianity, blackness, the black church, black power, and the philosophies of Martin and Malcolm. \(^99\) During the Civil Rights Movement, a division of racial philosophies existed in the African-American community.


\(^{97}\) Ibid.

\(^{98}\) Cone, *For My People*, 59.

\(^{99}\) Ibid.
Some African Americans subscribed to King’s philosophy on racial justice, and others subscribed to Malcolm’s philosophy on separatism. By combining the elements of both philosophies, black theology’s intent was to attain unity within the African-American community.

The most prominent person in the development of black theology has been James H. Cone, an African-American theologian. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Cone’s landmark trilogy of books, *Black Theology and Black Power, A Black Theology of Liberation* and *God of the Oppressed*, became the leading texts in outlining the importance of relating black theology to the marginalized and oppressed black people throughout the world.\(^{100}\) To theologize from within the black experience, North America was the main target to spearhead black theology. Black theology represents “the theological reflections of a radical black clergy seeking to interpret the meaning of God’s liberating presence in a society where blacks [are] being economically exploited and politically marginalized because of their skin color.”\(^ {101}\) Unquestionably, liberation governs the theological framework of black theology. Cone defines liberation as the struggle for “political, social, and economic justice.” Similarly, J. Deotis Roberts, an African-American theologian, considers liberation as the theme of black theology:


\(^{101}\) Cone, *For My People*, 59.
“Christ is the liberator and the Christian faith promises ‘deliverance to the captives.’ It promises to let the oppressed go free.”  

Cone asserts that black theology is relatively new to America. Although its roots began in the pre-Civil War black church, black theology was an occurrence of the 1960s. Cone states that “black theology is a religious explication of black people’s need to define the scope and meaning of black existence in a white racist society.” Black theology places black identity into a theological context and reveals that black power is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Moreover, black theology examines the socio-historical experience of African Americans in declaring in their confession that God gives revelation in Jesus Christ. This revelatory act establishes the conviction that the fight for justice is consistent with the gospel. “Blackness” not only refers to skin color, but it is a symbol of significance and power.

In symbolizing oppression, blackness as a concept allows for productive theological reflection. Cone argues that God is black, and furthermore, “God has made


104 Ibid.
the oppressed condition his own condition.” Accordingly, he asserts that Jesus is black because he identifies with the oppressed community, which is black. In solidarity, all oppressed individuals share blackness, and God is always on the side of the oppressed. With the advent of the Black Power movement of the 1960s, being black was a representation of pride. In Gayraud S. Wilmore’s view, “Blackness affirmed that ‘black was beautiful’ and renewed an appreciation for the African-American culture.” A thirst for knowledge inspired many African Americans to explore and embrace their African heritage. Although not all black theologians advocated an independence from typical Christian theology as the final goal, most theologians agreed that African Americans “had the right to claim self-identity, which meant embracing the following: a new name, African culture, linguistic style, slave tradition, racial lineage, the right of self-determination, and the right to separation.”


108 Ibid.

109 Hopkins, Heart and Head, 14.
CHAPTER 2

THE IMPACT OF BLACK THEOLOGY

Black theology is a theology that liberates and frees oppressed individuals. Any theology that comprises less than a theology that liberates cannot be Christian. Black theology upholds the words of Christ: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord (St. Luke 4: 18-19)."1

This scripture reveals the passion of Christ, which relates to the suffering of oppressed individuals. In black theology, this relationship resonates through its tenets to reveal the suffering of the oppressed and the suffering of Christ. The guiding principles of black theology are in harmony with the gospel. Christ suffered and died for the sins of humanity. Moreover, from a theological perspective, Christ "has come that they might have life not ghetto existence, not insufferable indignities, not racist contempt. But life full, free, abundant is their birthright as creatures of God."2 According to Cone, "God became human in Jesus Christ so that the kingdom of God would make freedom a reality

---


2 Ibid.
for all human beings. This is the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus."³ Black theology of liberation entails a number of principles. One principle is revelation. Revelation entails more than God revealing himself, but he reveals himself "in a situation of liberation."⁴

Historically, God acted on behalf of the following oppressed individuals: Moses in Egypt, the cry of Amos, Micah, and other Old Testament prophets. Equally important, God is visible in the struggle of the oppressed against injustices. Cone views this feature as black power, which is the contemporary revelation. The freedom sought is "by any means necessary."⁵ In the words of Cone,

> It is the power to love oneself precisely because one is black and a readiness to die if whites try to make one behave otherwise. It is the sound of James Brown singing, "I'm Black and I'm Proud" and Aretha Franklin demanding "respect." The black experience is catching the spirit of blackness and loving it. It is hearing black preachers speak of God's love in spite of the filthy ghetto, and black congregations responding Amen, which means that they realize that ghetto existence is not the result of divine decree but of white inhumanity.⁶

Cone states that having a sense of black consciousness is essential to understanding the plight of black people in America. Black consciousness recognizes the

---


⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

social, economic, and political status of black people, which is predicated by white people’s inability to deal with the presence of color. Cone asserts, “To know blackness is to know self, and to know self, and to know self is to be cognizant of other selves in relation to self.”\(^7\) Black consciousness is the black man’s self-awareness. Black consciousness equals black power, which is “the power of the oppressed blacks to liberate them from white enslavement by making blackness the primary datum of his humanity. It is the power to be black in spite of whiteness.”\(^8\)

Black consciousness is using one’s color to denote liberation. Cone emphasizes, “The biblical God is the God who is involved in the historical process for the purpose of human liberation, and to know him is to know what he is doing in historical events as they are related to the liberation of the oppressed. To know God is to encounter him in the historical liberation process as experienced in the community of the oppressed.”\(^9\) Cone argues that there is an urgency for “a theology whose sole purpose is to apply the freeing power of the gospel to black people under white oppression.”\(^10\) In applying Scripture to black theology, Cone asserts the following:

In the Bible, revelation, history, and faith are bound together. Revelation refers to God’s self-disclosure; history is the arena of divine revelation; and faith is the


\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^9\) Ibid., 51-52.

\(^10\) Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 31.
perspective that enables the community to discern divine activity. To know God, then, is to have faith in him. Faith is the divine-human encounter in the historical situation of oppression, wherein the enslaved community recognizes that its deliverance from bondage is the Divine himself at work in history. To know God is to know the actuality of oppression and the certainty of liberation.11

Cone states that “black theology is biblical theology. It is theology which takes seriously the importance of scripture in theological discourse.”12 In the Old Testament, liberation was presented as the Hebrew view of God. In Israelite history, God acted for the purpose of Israel’s liberation from oppression. In the New Testament, liberation was presented in the appearance of Jesus Christ, who assumed the oppressed condition. From the viewpoint of black theology, Jesus Christ is the emancipator, who reveals God and who we are. Paul said, “For freedom Christ has set us free (Gal. 5:1).” The good news of the liberation is the Christian Gospel.13 Cone explains, “If the Gospel of Christ is preeminently the gospel of the liberation of the oppressed, then the theological assessment of divine presence in America must begin with the black condition as its point of departure. It is only through an analysis of God as he is revealed


12 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 31.

in the struggle for black liberation that we can come to know the God who made himself known through Jesus Christ.”

In Cone’s view, “To study theology from the perspective of black theology means casting one’s mental and emotional faculties with the lot of the oppressed so that one may learn the cause and the cure of their humiliation.” In error, Cone is categorizing all white people as being oppressors; nonetheless, he fails to address the oppression that occurs within the black community – black on black violence and oppression. Apparently, he is too critical of the modus operandi of white people and is not properly addressing the actions of black people. Cone’s work on black theology was published in the late 1960s; therefore, his work was a product of the era. Like many African Americans, he was expressing his disdain for racial injustices against African Americans.

In black theology, Cone infuses some of the tenets of black power in the formulation of black theology. He states that “black theology is the theological explication of the blackness of black people. Its task is to analyze the black condition in the light of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ with the sole purpose of creating a new understanding of black dignity among black people, and providing the necessary soul in that people to destroy white racism.”

---

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 53.

and Malcolm X defined the role of the black church. If black liberation is not the sole focus of the black church, then the church is denying Christ and is aligning with the antichrist. Critically speaking, the black church should not solely focus on black liberation as a mechanism to liberate blacks; it should focus on liberation for all people who are oppressed.

The political withdrawal of the black church and its association with Booker T. Washington's accommodation philosophy created certain conditions that contributed to founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909, the National Urban League (NUL) in 1911, the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) in 1942, and the emergence of the modern Civil Rights Movement. These national organizations fought for justice and equality for blacks. The church strongly influenced the formation of these organizations. Civil rights organizations convened meetings in churches and made appeals for support from them. The relationship between the NAACP and the black churches was reflected in the statement that "the black church is the NAACP on its knees."\(^\text{18}\)


Based on the de-radicalization of the black church, it became difficult for progressive black ministers to continue their involvement in the internal affairs of their denominations. Baptist ministers, more so than Methodists, found it easier to become involved in the struggle for black equality. One example is the Powells, father and son pastors of Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York. In the 1930s, Powell made his debut in the political arena by leading a nonviolent direct action campaign and securing jobs for blacks in Harlem. Powell embraced the black religious tradition that did not separate the Christian gospel from the fight for justice. In Powell’s *Marching Blacks*, he accused white churches of converting Christianity into “churchianity,” which would misrepresent the fundamental message of the gospel of “equality” and humanity. Powell declared that “the great loving heart of God has been embalmed and laid coolly away in the tombs we call churches. Christ of the Manger, the carpenter’s bench, and the borrowed tomb has once again been crucified in stained-glass windows.”

The nationalist viewpoint on the black struggle for freedom is deeply entrenched in the history of black religious thought. Black nationalism is founded on blackness, which repudiates the value of white culture and religion. During the 1960s, Malcolm X

---

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

was the most influential interpreter of black nationalism. He advocated black unity and self-love. During a portion of the 1960s, King’s philosophy of nonviolence played a dominant role in the black religious community. After the Watts riot in 1965, some black clergy began to reconsider Malcolm’s philosophy, especially his ideas on Christianity in the American society. When Stokely Carmichael proclaimed “black power in 1966,” he sounded much like Malcolm X. Although committed to the Christian gospel, black clergy began drifting away from integration to separation. Many black clergy felt that King’s philosophy of nonviolence had run its course. They believed that it offered only pacification to the root of the problem. Cone contends that the Watts Riot (August 1965) revealed a deficiency in King’s optimism regarding nonviolence and the despondency of black Americans, which was illustrated in the violence that occurred urban America.

With the advent of black power, black clergy began to question the relation between black faith and white religion. With an emphasis on the African heritage and political liberation, black power took “black clergy out of their theological complacency.” Separating themselves from King’s nonviolent philosophy, a small group of northern black clergy addressed the Black Power movement positively. Black

---

22 Ibid., 767.

23 Cone, Risks of Faith, 88.

clergy were determined to remain true to their Christian faith, but they faced a dilemma on how to reconcile Christianity and black power. The time was changing, and black clergy believed a militant approach was crucial to accomplish equality for blacks.

Black theologians began to promote the development of a black theology based on the political philosophy of black power. They rejected American and European theologies as heretical. Black clergy and theologians insisted that a new theology must be defined by individuals at the bottom and not at the top of the socio-economic ladder. Black theologians began to focus God's liberation of the oppressed as the key message of the gospel. Cone states that black theology examines the gospel of Jesus Christ in relation to oppressed blacks, and consequently, they view the gospel as being inextricably related to their condition.

According to C. Eric Lincoln, it is imperative that black theology be interpreted as determining to reinforce the black church to commit to liberation. Black theology exposes white racism, and it may be able to "rescue the faith from its moral inertia." White theology leaves the black Christian hopeless and leaves white Christians with unrealistic views about Christian responsibility. Black theology is the gap that is missing

25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 768.
27 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 5.
28 Lincoln, The Black Church, 135, 138.
from white theology. Black theology speaks to black people. It originates from the black community to acknowledge its identity and to acknowledge God in the context of black history. Lincoln asserts that “liberation is the restoration of dignity, the negation of violence.” During the 1970s, many black theologians began to reject white theology as being an adequate framework of the God-and-man-in-history relationship that was discovered in the formal theology of some leading black preachers, which included Howard Thurman, Adam Clayton Powell, Martin Luther King, as well as in the formal writings of other black theologians.

Proponents of Black Theology

James H. Cone, an African-American theologian and the founder of black liberation theology, asserts that Christian theology is a theology of liberation. He defines Christian theology as “a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ.” Its sole purpose for existence is to articulate God’s activity in the world, so that oppressed individuals recognize that their drive for liberation is the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is no utility in Christian theology

29 Ibid., 145, 147.
30 Ibid., 151.
31 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 1.
if it does not identify with the oppressed.\textsuperscript{32} In agreement with Cone, if a Christian theology does not identify with the oppressed community, then it is not a theology of liberation. A Christian theology represents all humanity and assists the oppressed in their freedom.

With a biblical emphasis on liberation, the Christian community is defined as the community of the oppressed, which unites Jesus Christ in his fight for the liberation of humankind. The task of theology is to illuminate the meaning of God’s liberating activity so that the oppressed believes that liberation is the activity of God. Christian theology is a study of God’s liberating activity in the world, and its duty is to analyze the meaning of God’s hope in a manner that the oppressed community will risk all for earthly freedom; such freedom is possible in the resurrection of Jesus. Because it is inseparable from the oppressed community, the language of theology challenges societal structures.\textsuperscript{33}

According to Cone, “the black experience requires that Scripture be a source of black theology.”\textsuperscript{34} Cone contends that the emergence of black theology is due to the failure of white religionists to apply the gospel of Jesus Christ to the suffering of blacks in a racist society. It emerges from the need of African Americans to liberate themselves from white hegemony. Black theology considers the black condition when interpreting

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 3-4.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Cone, \textit{God of the Oppressed}, 29.
\end{itemize}
the gospel of Jesus Christ. Black theology promotes the liberation of the black community as God’s liberation. Additionally, it is designed for African Americans to view the gospel as being inseparable from their oppression and as using it as an instrument to destroy oppression. Cone declares that black theology is created to advance liberation in the black community. Because black theology identifies with the black experience, it is able to provide credibility to the African-American religious experience.35 Furthermore, Cone states that “black people’s religious ideas were shaped by the cultural and political existence of the victims in North America.”36

Black theology is a Christian theology for two reasons. First, a theology of the gospel does not exist if it does not originate from an oppressed community. God is righteous and is inseparable from the oppressed in society. Second, black theology aims to interpret God’s activity as related to, specifically, the oppressed black community.37 Clearly, Cone sees God as identifying solely with the oppressed community. If God is inseparable from the oppressed, he will not abandon them.

Nonpartisan theology can never materialize in a revolutionary situation. Theology identifies with a specific community and, mostly, identifies with the victims of oppression. A theology that identifies with the oppressed is an authentic Christian

35 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 4-5.


37 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 5.
theology, and a theology that is nonpartisan is a theology of the anti-Christ. Black theology is a Christian theology because of its identification with liberating the oppressed black community. American white theology is a theology that identifies with the anti-Christ because it is grounded in the white community, which embraces God’s approval on white oppression of black existence. Cone further states that “the dialectic of theology and social existence is particularly obvious in its white American branch when that theology is related to the people of African descent on the American continent. While some white theologians in the twentieth century have emphasized the relativity of faith in history, they have seldom applied this insight to the problem of the color line.” Because American white theology neglects the needs of the oppressed, seemingly, Cone believes that it is not Christ-centered. To be Christ-centered, he makes it clear that a theology is required to always address the needs of the oppressed.

Cone indicates that God is never color-blind in a racist society. If God is color-blind, then God is blind to justice and injustice. God identifies with blacks, which means that black liberation is the work of God. Black theology merely tries to discern the

38 Ibid., 6.
activity of God in achieving the purpose of liberating the oppressed against the forces of oppression.40

According to Cone, white theology is a theology of oppression, which serves as a divine sanction for criminal acts committed against blacks. Cone indicates that Christian theology can only mean black theology, which is a theology that speaks of God as related to black liberation.41 Cone asserts that “Christian theology must come from the struggles of the oppressed for justice.”42 Theology has consistently preserved the integrity of oppressors, but Cone concludes that it is not Christian theology. The liberating deeds of God maintain that all acts participating in the destruction of white racism are Christian. Actions that hinder black self-determination and black power are anti-Christian.43 Consequently, Cone feels that white theology represents racism; whereas, black theology represents liberation and justice.

In defining black theology, it is “a theology of and for black people, an examination of their stories, tales, and sayings.”44 Black theology is often referred to as a survival theology because it seeks to provide the theological dimensions of the struggle for black identity. It restructures religious language to illustrate that all forces supporting

41 Ibid., 9.
42 Cone, *For My People*, 165.
44 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 11.
white oppression are anti-Christian. The gospel of Christ represents black humanity, and therefore, any religious institution that tolerates racism rejects black theology. Cone declares that "black theology rejects the tendency of classic Christianity to appeal to divine providence." In addition, black theology rejects individuals who counsel blacks to accept the limitations that society places on them. In responding to the black condition, black theology assumes the character of rebellion, and black theology compels blacks to revolt against the structures of white power by affirming blackness. Cone asserts that "theology must take the risk of faith, knowing that it stands on the edge of condemnation by the forces of evil." Certainly, black theology depicts pride and self-love. In addition, it gives identity to the oppressed, which is a component in the fight for liberation.

The existence of black theology is dependent on its ability to relate to the human situation unique to the oppressed community. If black theology fails to achieve this outcome, consequently, the black community can abolish it. The norm of black theology considers two aspects of reality: the liberation of blacks and the revelation of Jesus Christ. Cone purports that "the norm of all God-talk which seeks to be black-talk is the manifestation of Jesus as the black Christ who provides the necessary soul for black liberation." In addition, Cone asserts that "if the gospel is a gospel of liberation for the

45 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 10-16.
46 Ibid., 17.
47 Ibid., 36, 38.
oppressed, then Jesus is where the oppressed are."48 Black theology rejects any norm that
does not focus on Jesus Christ because he is the essence of the Christian gospel. Black
theology’s development is an attempt by the black community to define what God means
for its existence in a white racist society.49 According to Cone, “throughout black
history, Scripture was used for a definition of God and Jesus that was consistent with the
black struggle for liberation.”50

Essentially, the blackness of God is the core of black theology’s doctrine of God. In a society where human beings suffer precisely because of their color, black theology
does not tolerate a colorless God. The black theologian rejects any conception of God,
which hinders black self-determination. Emphatically, Cone states that “either God is
identified with the oppressed to the point that their experience becomes God’s
experience, or God is a God of racism.”51 Because blacks choose to identify with being
black, the blackness of God is the key to their knowledge of God.52 If God is on the side
of the oppressed, then Cone believes that God can only be black. If God is black, he is
able to promote self-determination in the African-American community.

48 Cone, Risks of Faith, 9-10.
49 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 38, 42.
50 James H. Cone, God of the Oppressed, 29.
51 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 63.
52 Ibid.
In American society, a major contribution of black theology has been its ability to relate the Christian faith to the black freedom struggle. In addition, black theology has contributed to attacking racism in the white church and its theology. Previously, blacks felt rejected from the Christian community as a result of the racism they encountered in white churches. This prophetic condemnation of racism allowed the black clergy to develop an alternative theology that was essential in empowering of blacks in their struggle for freedom. Obviously, American Christian theology did not accommodate the spiritual needs of African Americans because of its lack of condemning racism. Consequently, the black clergy designed a theology that specifically met the spiritual needs of African Americans.

In Black Theology and Pedagogy, Noel Leo Erskine asserts that James Cone's Black Theology and Black Power was the first text in liberation theology to address the idea that a sin against God and the community is a loss of black identity. In a racist context, theology is required to consider people in terms of their color. During the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King, Jr., stated that racism was the most pressing problem facing America, and James Cone took heed to his suggestion. Erskine cites Cone as raising the question as to “whether the deprecation of segregation is not in theory, if not in practice, an expression of self-hate.”

---

53 Cone, For My People, 79.
54 Ibid., 81.
black experience as the point of departure for reflection about self-worth. In Erskine’s support for black theology, it is designed to create a sense of identity and self-worth for the African-American community.

Anthony B. Bradley, an African-American theologian, suggests that for black theology to be effective, it has to be formulated within biblically constrained assumptions. Black theology’s future is relies heavily on accepting the triune God and interpreting the black experience through the lens of biblical passages. Throughout his work, Cone gives examples of biblical passages that relate to God liberating individuals living on the margins of society.

While black theology affirms blackness, Bradley contends that it cannot be interpreted as an anti-white reactionary theology. Blackness is a symbol of oppression that applies to persons of color who are experiencing oppression. Black liberation theologians seek to apply theology that affirms the humanity of blacks. Bradley states that the emphasis of black liberation theology is the black struggle for liberation from a variety of forms of white racism and oppression. Although Bradley agrees with Cone’s black theology, Cone may not agree with Bradley’s assertion that theology is not an anti-

---

56 Ibid.
57 Bradley, 15.
58 Ibid., 18.
59 Ibid., 19.
white reactionary theology. Unquestionably, Cone condemns a theology that does not support blackness and liberation. In analyzing Cone’s earlier work on black theology, he was responding to the condition of blacks during the height of the Black Power movement.

Bradley indicates that Cone developed black theology as a system that articulated liberation as the starting point and essence of theology. Many of these initial developments served as the foundation for later developments of black theology as a theological system.60 According to Cone, Bradley asserts that one of the tasks of black theology is to analyze the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in considering the experience of oppressed blacks. He agrees with Cone’s assertion that “no theology is a Christian theology unless it arises from oppressed communities and interprets Jesus’ work as that of liberation.”61 Christian theology is interpreted in terms of systemic and structural relationships between two main groups: the oppressed and the oppressors.62

In Cone’s view, Christ’s liberation is freeing African Americans from white oppression. Moreover, the sole reason for the existence of theology as a discipline is assisting the oppressed.63 Bradley agrees with Cone’s argument for a black theology.


61 Bradley, 38.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.
He supports Cone’s assertion that black theology is designed to be a theology that serves the oppressed community. Moreover, Bradley states that black theology is supported by a valid theological framework.

Harry H. Singleton, III, an African-American theologian, identifies Cone’s black theology as an innovative way of doing theology that “strips whiteness of its power and elevates blackness as a means of empowering black people to do what they deem necessary to bring about their freedom.” Cone considers the elevation of blackness as being consistent with the divine activity of God as revealed in Jesus to free individuals who are held captive by political structures. Therefore, Cone asserts that there is “a need for a theology whose sole purpose is to emancipate the gospel from its whiteness so that blacks may be capable of making self-affirmation through Jesus Christ.” Singleton endorses Cone’s black theology as a legitimate theology, which serves to liberate African Americans from the spiritual confines of American Christian theology. Similar to Cone, Singleton equates American Christian theology with white religion.

Singleton asserts that exposing the ideological nature of white religion and its debilitating impact on the black self-image is critical to a theology of liberation. The primary responsibility of black theology is to relate the oppressed condition of blacks to

---


65 Ibid.
the biblical witness by revealing that the revelation of God is inseparable from the
liberation of the oppressed. Furthermore, black theology establishes the revelation of
God as manifesting itself in “moments of oppression” in both biblical and modern
history.66 Therefore, God assumes the condition of the oppressed and makes the struggle
for liberation his own.

If the suffering of God is revealed in the suffering of the oppressed, then
“theology cannot achieve its Christian identity apart from a systematic and critical
reflection upon the history and culture of the victims of oppression.”67 Singleton asserts
that black theology is a theology of black liberation. Overall, he states that “black
theology empowers black people to determine what it is in their best interest socially,
economically, politically, and religiously, and to destroy everything in society that is
inimical to those interests, particularly ideologies of white supremacy.”68 Seemingly,
Singleton wants to expose white religion as being a religion of oppression for African
Americans; whereas, black theology is the only theology that promotes liberation for
African Americans.

66 Ibid., 38-39.
67 James H. Cone, “Black Theology in American Religion,” Journal of the American Academy of
Religion 53, no. 4 (December 1985): 770, quoted in Harry H. Singleton, III, Black Theology and Ideology:
68 Singleton, 41.
Critics of Black Theology

A number of tensions existed with the development of black theology. Some of these tensions were the result of black theologians’ efforts “to vindicate their right to sit at the roundtable of the comprehensive field of theology” and to be true to the black religious experience based on their theological interpretation. Black theology faces the challenge whether its academic respectability enhances the black religious experience or contributes to its destruction.69

Cecil Wayne Cone, African-American theologian and brother of James H. Cone, states that James Cone was the first to publish a book on black theology. He applauds Cone for doing significant work in this field more than any other scholar. In his historical study, he explores a collection of testimonies of the African-American religious experience in America. These testimonies shape the religious tradition of African Americans. Black theology can only be true to itself by finding its source in that particular tradition. Therefore, the approach to black theology is historical in the form of a phenomenology of the fundamental elements that African Americans adopt in their religious practice.70 Cecil Wayne Cone examines black theology using a historical and traditional approach.71 In like manner, James Cone uses a historical and traditional


70 Ibid., 81.

71 Ibid., 34.
approach in examining black theology. In addition, he uses biblical passages in his examination of black theology.

Cecil Wayne Cone asserts that tensions in black theology occur from its acceptance of black power as a theological base while still maintaining its identification with the black religious tradition. Black theology and black power are not easily reconcilable. Black theology, an instrument in the black liberation struggle, encounters the question of "whether its attempts to be relevant (based on the standards of black power exponents) will be an asset to black religion or the cause of its demise."\(^{72}\) Before James Cone coined the term "black theology," the black church was known to be an instrument of social protest. In a counterargument, Noel Erskine asserts that the Black Power movement is related to the black church because of its philosophy of black dignity and black self-determination.\(^{73}\) Since Christian theology does not identify with the oppression of African Americans, it is necessary that black theology include the tenets of black power in an effort to effectively address the needs of African Americans.

The problem of identity in black theology consists of the following: "its identification with the academic structure of predominantly white seminaries and with the black power motif of black radicals."\(^{74}\) Theology is a systematic description of the faith

\(^{72}\) Ibid., 32.

\(^{73}\) Noel Leo Erskine, *King Among the Theologians* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1994), 84.

\(^{74}\) Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology*, 32-33.
of the church, and black theology’s roots are in the black religious experience. The essence of the black theologian’s work is shaped by matters other than black religion, such as Euro-American theological customs and the slogans of black power.\textsuperscript{75} Cone argues that black theology developed as a result of the failure of white religionists to relate the gospel of Jesus Christ to the black community.\textsuperscript{76} Therefore, black theology consists of Euro-American theological constructs, but it also includes a biblical foundation, which is found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. In addition, Erskine argues that black theology is a Christian theology because it centers on Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{77}

A related problem is the use of the historical critical method in black theology. Being a component of theological work in white seminaries, this method contributes to the identity crisis in black theology. This method fails to investigate the nature of black religion because it consists of critical elements that claim to transcend history. These elements address the object of faith. Black theology’s intent to be academically sound includes a method that is unable to locate what black theology is trying to advance. For theological purposes, the investigation of black religion does not answer the questions of historical verifiability associated with the critical method. A reason does not exist within the black religious tradition to validate by humanistic means the substance of black

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{76} Cone, \textit{A Black Theology of Liberation}, 4.

\textsuperscript{77} Erskine, \textit{King Among the Theologians}, 98.
faith. Erskine argues that this historical basis of faith is crucial to understanding black theology.

Cecil Wayne Cone argues that Cone's black theology is a threat to many white people. The tone of his work reflects an angry black militant who is angry with white individuals in society. Utilizing the black and white struggle created by racism, Cone develops his theology so that blackness represents Christ, and whiteness represents the anti-Christ. As revealed in Cone's work, he invites white people to identify with blackness as related to black theology. Moreover, the dominant theme of Cone's work is liberation. In opposition, Erskine asserts:

Theology is able, with the help of sociology, to analyze who owns the means of production and to what extent the poverty of the poor is contrived. Black theology begins to discover that the social arrangements of society reflect the interests of the dominant class and race. One reason why the dominant class helps to promote religion is because it serves as a sedative for the oppressed, preventing them from questioning the social and material arrangements of society.

Cone asserts that the emphasis on liberation is approached by analyzing the relationship of revelation, faith, and history.

---


79 Erskine, *King Among the Theologians*, 102.

80 Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology*, 81.

81 Erskine, *King Among the Theologians*, 110.

82 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 46.
Cecil Wayne Cone recommends that Cone needs to realize that he is being influenced more by Euro-American conceptions of freedom than by the religious freedom of the black religious experience. African freedom cannot be disconnected from religion. Cecil Wayne Cone states that “it is religion, a meeting of the God of their existence in the depths of the struggle to be human.” If Cone ignores this theme for the initial point of black theology and accepts the Euro-American view of freedom in history, he will continue to remain in an identity crisis and will never fully be able to investigate the scope of black religion. Cone argues that our freedom is connected with the struggles of oppressed peoples throughout the world both politically and economically.

According to Erskine, Cone promotes the idea that theology has to be universal because God is universal. He uses blackness as a category to address the oppression of African Americans, but at the same time, the door of reconciliation is opened to all people.

In his essay, “Theodicy and Methodology in Black Theology: A Critique of Washington, Cone, and Cleage,” William R. Jones cites James H. Cone as stating that “the point of departure of black theology is the question: How do we dare speak of God in a suffering world in which blacks are humiliated because they are black? This

---

83 Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology*, 113.
84 Ibid.
85 Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 54.
86 Erskine, *King Among the Theologians*, 90.
question occupies the central place in our theological perspective."87 If black liberation is the purpose of black theology, black suffering is its initial point. The precondition for black liberation as the objective for black theology affirms black suffering as being oppressive.88

Due to black suffering, the question of divine racism is addressed. Suffering is “multi-evidential; it can express a relation of favor or disfavor between man and ultimate reality.”89 Black suffering is not catastrophic but expands over long periods of history, which spans from slavery to the Civil Rights Movement. Jones contends that black suffering poses the question of divine racism. He insists that black theology “cannot proceed as if the goodness of God for all mankind were a theological axiom.”90 The black theologian must demonstrate its inaccuracy.91 In refuting Jones’ argument, Cone asserts that theology is not inseparable from the community which it represents.92

Jones strengthens his argument by introducing determining factors in addition to

---


89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

suffering that forces black theologians to consider the issue of transcendent al racism. He contends that black theology is committed to a new approach, and divine racism is an indisputable alternative. The implications of black consciousness are infused in a theological method that supports his argument. Erskine argues that Cone often refers to the black community as the community of the oppressed. Erskine states that "the God of the Oppressed is not merely the God of black people as a racial unit but the God of all people who are in solidarity with the oppressed."  

Black theologians identify black consciousness with a particular theological method. Because it recognizes the commitment of some African Americans to white theology, black consciousness promotes the creation of an opposing theology, a black theology, which is a theology of liberation. Black consciousness requires a theological movement beyond white theology and a conscious resistance to it. Virtually, the black experience is the impetus for theological innovativeness. More specifically, it means the following:

(1) Black theology must adopt a method of correlation. The starting point for theological reflection must be the issues and questions that emerge from the black experience, and the answers, i.e., the black theology, must be consistent with that experience. (2) The black experience must function as the

---


94 Erskine, King Among the Theologians, 97.

theological singular. It passes final judgment upon the functional or dysfunctional quality of each part of the theological tradition. (3) A theological concept is functional if and only if it advances the cause of black liberation. (4) As a consequence of the foregoing, black theology is methodologically obliged to conduct a radical and comprehensive appraisal of classical theological concepts to determine if each possesses sufficient "soul" to be included in the emerging black theology. The appraisal must be total—not even God or Jesus Christ can a priori be regarded sacrosanct; they must be jettisoned if they flunk the test.96

Because black theology suspects that the Christian norms are racist, it continues to be contemporary in nature. It is essential that Christian norms submit to a strict theological ban until each norm demonstrates an "enhancement of black liberation."

Black theology contradicts itself if it accepts a contemporary approach, which highlights black suffering but fails to address divine racism. Once the issue is introduced, the next step for black theology is to devise a workable theodicy.97 In response to Jones' criticism, Cone insists that authentic preaching address the dimensions of racism, sexism, poverty, classism, social and economic exploitation throughout the world. Cone encourages the black church to create a new vision of a new social order that finds solutions to end world poverty, monopoly capitalism, anti-democratic socialism, racism, and sexism.98 In this sense, he is suggesting that black theology is able to address divine racism.

96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
98 Erskine, King Among the Theologians, 105, 113.
A workable theodicy is critical to the framework black theology, which is supported in terms of the black theologians’ beliefs. One main point to consider is the doctrine of the politics of God. This doctrine indicates how individuals must unite with God in their effort of human liberation. In the context of black theology, the politics of God assumes that he endorses the liberation of blacks; moreover, he is not a racist.  

If black theology defines itself as a theology of liberation, Jones contends that the theodicy question dominates the discussion. Black suffering is interpreted as oppressive, and not every theodicy offers this fundamental interpretation. A theodicy involves passivity and is considered to be counter-revolutionary. A theology of liberation includes not only a theodicy but one with a precise nature. Moreover, this type of theology explains the deficiencies of alternative theodicies. The groundwork for the black theologian in constructing a theological framework entails a theodicy which refutes the claim that God is a white racist. Cone believes that God is never color blind. Moreover, black theology proclaims God’s blackness, and Cone asserts that “we must become black with God.” Black theology exists to address the injustices against the oppressed and not only the injustices against blacks.

---


100 Ibid., 144.

101 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 6.

102 Ibid., 66.
Jones acknowledges that it is to Cone’s advantage that “he avoids a theodicy which implies the perpetuity of black suffering.”103 The structure of Cone’s argument includes the following: “

First, a class is posited that involves a special and favored relation to deity. For Cone, this class was suffering of the oppressed. Second, it is argued that blacks are members of the class in question. Third, the conclusion follows: God is not a racist.”104

Cone argues that Christian theology is to analyze the meaning of hope in God. Theology is designed to challenge societal structures because it is inseparable from the suffering community.105

Cone’s argument demonstrates that the liberation of the oppressed is the core of the biblical Heilsgeschichte.106 This factor is the underpinning for the other components of his theodicy; “liberation of the oppressed is a part of the innermost nature of God.”107 When liberation becomes the essence of God, it serves a dual purpose. It connects African Americans to biblical acts of liberation and answers the question of divine


104 Ibid.

105 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 4


107 Ibid.
racism. Cone adds that "if liberation is the essence of divine activity, racism, by
definition, is not possible. God’s acts of liberation in the past assure African Americans
that he has made their liberation his concern, and he abides with them in their struggle
towards freedom."\textsuperscript{108} In biblical history, Israel knew God as the liberator of the
oppressed, and it recognized that it was inseparable from God.\textsuperscript{109}

According to Jones, another aspect of Cone’s theodicy warrants special
attention. His approach does not provide an explanation for the "why" of black suffering.
Moreover, he does not seek to harmonize it with God’s will, and he purports that white
racism is the major issue. He supports his argument with the facts of what God has done
for the oppressed in the past and presently, what he is doing about black oppression.
Because God is participating in the African-American struggle for freedom, black
suffering does not imply divine racism.\textsuperscript{110} In addition, Cone argues that black suffering is
a result of whites making decisions about their place in the world. In the black church, a
connection is made with the biblical story of the humanity of Christ because this story
teaches that he enters into solidarity with the oppressed. In Christ’s suffering, black
Christians can find a reason for the meaning of their own suffering.\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{109} Cone, \textit{A Black Theology of Liberation}, 47.

\textsuperscript{110} Willaim R. Jones, "Theodicy and Methodology in Black Theology: A Critique of Washington,

\textsuperscript{111} Erskine, \textit{King Among the Theologians}, 102.
In Jones’ analysis, he contends that Cone’s position is vulnerable at critical points. To assume that “a class that presupposes a favored relation to God – and the term oppressed carries this stipulated meaning for Cone – is to exclude the alternative of God’s disfavor by definition.”112 It is important to note whether Cone substantiates the claim that the liberation of African Americans is crucial to God’s existence. The claim can be validated by identifying actual acts of God on behalf of black liberation. Once the issue of God’s racism is addressed, the fact of his liberating action for non-blacks is not relevant to the assertion that God is a white racist.113 In a counterargument, Cone declares that the oppressed must live as free people and not in bondage. The gospel of liberation is the content of the church’s preaching because it is the essence of the ministry of Jesus. He asserts that “the gospel is the proclamation of God’s liberation as revealed in the event of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.”114

In addition, Jones criticizes the response of Albert Cleage, an African-American theologian, on the same issue. In terms of his concept of the blackness of God, Jesus, and the Jews, Cleage indicates that God supports the liberation of African Americans. The physical blackness of God partially confirms his status as “soul” brother and assures his


113 Ibid.

active participation in the struggle for black liberation. By assuming that Jews are black, he provides assurance to the fact of God’s liberating effort on behalf of the oppressed. Liberation is not limited to black-white relations in the United States, but it extends to the relations between rich and poor nations. In addition, Cone asserts that “liberation knows no color bar; the very nature of the gospel is universalism, that is, a liberation that embraces the whole of humanity.”

To validate black liberation, Jones suggests that Cone isolates the liberation factor or progress of events through a study of African-American history. He also suggests that Cone needs to provide evidence that God is on the side of African Americans. In an opposing argument, black theology focuses on black history as a source for its theological interpretation of God’s work. Moreover, divine activity is inseparable from black history. By delivering his people from Egyptian bondage, Cone argues that God is revealed as the God of the oppressed because he liberates individuals from their human


116 Cone, Risks of Faith, 47.


118 Cone, Risks of Faith, 49.
bondage. Cone indicates that the New Testament provides evidence that Jesus is for the oppressed and against oppressors.\textsuperscript{119}

Jacqueline Grant, an African-American theologian, mentions that liberation theologies originated from the contexts of the liberation struggles of African Americans, Latin Americans, American women, black South Africans, and Asians. These theologies represent a departure from traditional Christian theology. Grant argues that liberation theologies raise questions about the normative application of the Scripture, tradition and experience in Christian theology. Liberation theologians indicate that the theologies of the West have been used to justify the established order. Some theologians who have been assigned to interpreting the meaning of God’s activity in the world have been too content to represent the dominant classes.\textsuperscript{120}

By criticizing classical theology, liberation theology has been severely scrutinized. Grant indicates that "where racism is rejected, sexism has been embraced."\textsuperscript{121} In order for liberation theology to be credible, it requires criticism from the perspective of the black woman who is, perhaps, the most oppressed of all the oppressed. In examining black theology, Grant indicates that it is necessary to make the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{119} Cone. \textit{A Black Theology of Liberation}. 2
\item \textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
following assumptions: "(1) either black women have no place in the enterprise, or (2) black men are capable of speaking for us."\textsuperscript{122} She admits that these assumptions are false and need to be discarded. They originate from a male-dominated culture, which prevents women from pursuing specific disciplines in society. In such a culture, men are granted the opportunity to speak for women on all matters of significance. A dualism emerges between black men and women.\textsuperscript{123} Therefore, black men continue to increase their power in the male-dominated society, while black women continue to endure the stereotypes and oppressions of an earlier period. Since sexual dualism is prevalent in the black community, the outcome is that black women are invisible in black theology. Black women do not play a role in black theology. Inevitably, black men assume the role to speak for the entire black community.\textsuperscript{124}

Ironically, Grant was a former seminarian student and protégé of James H. Cone. Surprisingly, she condemns segments of Cone’s work; however, apologetically, in his latest edition, Cone makes amends for his oversight of not addressing the relevance of black theology from a woman’s perspective. Furthermore, Cone states that true preaching addresses the dimensions of racism, sexism, poverty, classism, social and

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 831-833.
economic exploitation.\textsuperscript{125} It is obvious that he supports a theology that is not discriminatory in nature.

In particular, Grant states that black women lack visibility in theology because theological scholarship has not been an important role for women. The first assumption results from the historical orientation of the dominant culture. Second, if women do not have a role in theology, it becomes men's prerogative to monopolize theological concerns, including those relating to women. Grant examines how the absence of black women in producing black theology will result in a theology that will not be in the best interest of black women. Indeed, feminist theologians argue that a male-dominated theology only serves to bolster patriarchal structures in society. If black men accept those structures, there is not any reason to believe that the theology by black men will be any more liberating of black women than white theology is for white women. In considering the oppression of black people, it is imperative that black men be particularly sensitive to the oppression of others.\textsuperscript{126}

Grant cites Cone as stating that the task of black theology "is to analyze the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of oppressed black people so they will see the

\textsuperscript{125} Erskine, \textit{King Among the Theologians}, 105.

gospel as inseparable from their humiliated condition."\textsuperscript{127} Moreover, Cone indicates that "this means that it is a theology of and for the black community, seeking to interpret the religious dimensions of the forces of liberation in that community."\textsuperscript{128} Oppressive realities exist in the black community, which are related to racism.\textsuperscript{129} In Cone’s defense, Rosemary Radford Ruether, a white feminist theologian, argues that Cone recognizes the importance of incorporating black feminism in black theology.\textsuperscript{130} In addition to black theology, she states that black women need to define their own experience and interpretation of their liberation.\textsuperscript{131}

Grant’s central argument is the following: “Black theology cannot continue to treat black women as if they were invisible creatures who are on the outside looking into the black experience, the black church, and the black theological enterprise. It will have to deal with the community of believers in all aspects as integral parts of the whole

---


\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.
community."  

132 Until black women theologians are fully participating in the theological enterprise, black male theologians and black leaders need to be kept cognizant of their negligence. Awareness is required to highlight the fact that black women are needed as theologians and church leaders. When black women and men share the leadership in theology and in the church, the black community will become stronger and liberated. To that end, black theology can become a theology of divine liberation. Black women need to continue the dialogue about the issue of sexism in the black church and in black theology until sexism is eliminated.  

133 Cone argues that only black women can develop a black feminist theology to reflect their own experience. He states that "if theology arises out of the attempt to reconcile faith with life, and if black women have an experience of faith in God that is not exhausted by white women or black men, then there is a need to articulate the faith of black women so that the universal church can learn from their experience with God."  

134 In his latest edition, Cone argues that sexism dehumanizes and must be eliminated. He asserts that sexism is a problem of the human condition, and it is a detriment to society. He declares that black theologians need to incorporate a critique of sexist practices and provide recommendations to abolish them.  


133 Ibid.

134 Cone, For My People, 135.

135 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, xvi.
Letty M. Russell, a white feminist theologian, contends that black theology is black because it embraces the experience of oppression among American blacks. She admits that “black theology has a problem with genitive theology because its emphasis on the black experience leads to a theology about blacks.” Various theologians support a systematic theology because it is difficult for them to separate black ideologies from a theology that traces back to the tradition of black and African oppression. She declares that “James Cone has been concerned to defend himself against making blackness, rather than Jesus Christ, his ultimate reality.” Cone argues that black theology is universal, and it teaches that all people are created for freedom. Furthermore, he endorses a liberation theology that embraces all humanity.

Russell believes that another problem of black theology is that it only focuses on African Americans, and seemingly, it focuses exclusively on black males. She considers black theology to be sexist in much the same way as some feminist theologies tend to be.

---


138 Ibid.


140 Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 49.
racist. Apparently, the style of black theology develops out of emulation of the oppressor, which is the white male theologian. The tone of black theology is authoritarian and lacks consideration of the cultural myths. In addressing weaknesses in black theology, black women need to create their own theology, so that an accurate understanding of the black experience emerges in relation to the meaning of the Gospel. Another approach is to change the sexist language, so that it represents the "universal dimension of liberation theology as it relates to both women and men."\(^{141}\) By giving an account of their faith in worship and living out their faith, Cone recommends that black women create the context for an authentic theological reflection.\(^{142}\) Historically, black women have very profound experiences that must be inclusive in the study of black theology.

According to Russell, classism is another problem that impacts black theology. Within the American society, "class is operative in stratifying the bourgeois above the black lower classes."\(^{143}\) Black theology reflects this class stratification, which is similar to feminist theology. Russell purports that black theology is predominantly middle-class

---


\(^{142}\) Cone, *For My People*, 135-136.

and academic in its focus, which is not always connected to the black church. The power of black theology is inhibited by economic and class distinctions in an effort to advocate liberation in its own community. In an opposing argument, Cone embraces the theology of Martin Luther King, Jr. He states that King’s theology focuses on the themes of justice, love, and hope, which are grounded in the black church’s faith in Jesus Christ. Historically, the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power movement provided a credible foundation for black theology.

In response to the role of women in black theology, Cone issues the following statement:

Contrary to what many black men say (especially preachers), sexism is not merely a problem for white women. Rather, it is a problem of the human condition. It destroys the family and society, and makes it impossible for persons to create a society defined according to God’s intention for humanity. Any black male theologian or preacher who ignores sexism as a central problem in our society and church is just as guilty of distorting the gospel as is a white theologian who does the same with racism. If we black male theologians do not take seriously the need to incorporate into our theology a critique of our sexist practices in the black community, then we have no right to complain when white theologians snub black theology.

Victor Anderson, an African-American theologian, asserts that black theology makes a clear departure from black life and experience, which “constitutes the

---

144 Ibid.

145 Cone, Risks of Faith, 54.

146 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, xvi.
He contends that a number of problems exists in Cone’s black theology from its beginning. These problems focus on the relation of black theology to the black churches. Critics ask how black theology is a theology of the black churches if it disengages itself from the creeds and the liturgical practices that provide the framework for the black churches. For some critics, black theology appears to promote a revolutionary consciousness that is similar to white racism and “less like an expression of the evangelical gospel that characterized most black churches.” Cone states that black theology creates a theological norm in harmony with the black condition and biblical revelation. Black theology analyzes the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in considering the oppression of blacks, so they will understand how the gospel is inseparable from their condition.

Anderson notes that most of Cone’s problems focus on the category of symbolic blackness. Cone’s problems are created by internal contradictions. First, black theology, as formulated by Cone, risks “self-referential inconsistency when it sees itself as radically oppositional to white racism and white theology.” In black theology, blackness is the

---


148 Ibid.


essence of its meaning. It cannot point to any transcendent meaning beyond itself without disintegrating. Because black life is essentially established by black suffering and resistance to whiteness, black existence lacks transcendence from the determinacy of whiteness. Therefore, black theology’s promise of liberation remains a function of black self-consciousness. Conversely, Cone argues it is white racism and white theology that threaten the promise of black liberation, which “remains connected existentially and politically.”151 Cone asserts that “blackness is an ontological symbol for all people who participate in the liberation of man from oppression.”152 Cone is aware that theology has to be both particular and universal at the same time. Based on this assertion, Erskine adds that blackness is related to “whether your body, mind, and spirit are in solidarity with the oppressed.”153

151 Ibid.


153 Ibid.
CHAPTER 3

FIGHTING ADAM

In examining the theology of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., first, the theology of Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. is discussed in an effort to understand his son’s theology. This discussion describes how Powell, Sr.’s theology developed over time and how his theology heavily influenced his son’s theology.

Powell, Sr. was born in Martins Mill, Virginia. In 1875, his family moved to West Virginia to work on a farm. Often, he was involved in violent activities and was forced to leave the state in 1884. He worked in the coal mines in Rendville, Ohio. In 1885, Rendville hosted a revival, and Powell, Sr. was “born again.” Thereafter, he attended the Rendville Academy while working as a school janitor. Inspired by the biographies of Frederick Douglass and other well-known black leaders, he made a decision to prepare for a career in law and politics.

In 1886, Powell, Sr. moved to Washington, D.C., to attend Howard University School of Law. Insufficient academic preparation and lack of funds prevented him from actually pursuing studies at the university. Powell, Sr. accepted employment at the Howard House, a hotel in Washington. While reading the Bible, he “was seized with an

---

1 Hereafter, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., will be denoted as Powell.

2 Hereafter, Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. will be denoted as Powell, Sr.

unquenchable desire to preach" and in 1888 began classes at Wayland Seminary (later Virginia Union University) in Washington. He graduated in 1892, and in 1889, he married Mattie Fletcher Shaffer, whom he met while living in West Virginia. After being married, they expanded their family by including a daughter and a son.\(^5\)

The Theology of Adam Clayton Powell, Sr.

Before accepting his pastorate at Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City, he was the senior pastor at Immanuel Baptist Church in New Haven, Connecticut. During his pastorate at Immanuel, he enrolled in classes as a special student at the Yale Divinity School in 1895. From 1895 to 1896, he studied and worked closely with Yale Professor Samuel Harris (1814-1899).\(^6\) He was influenced by Harris for many reasons. He believed that "Harris favored Martin Luther’s idea of each Christian as his own interpreter."\(^7\) He and Harris believed that "everyone who belong[ed] to God through faith in Jesus [could] learn from Hebrew Scriptures and interpret them to teach, reprove,


\(^5\) Ibid.


correct, and train people in righteousness." Harris mentored him in hermeneutics, and with his mentoring, Powell, Sr. began to place Christ at the center while blending "intellectuality with spirituality in Biblical hermeneutics." Powell, Sr. shared with Professor Harris a firm belief in the efficacy of the Holy Spirit. He focused on the Bible without agreeing with fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is defined as "a religiously based cognitive and affective orientation to the world characterized by protest against change and the ideological orientation of modernism." Harris believed that the "Fundamentalists' theory of mechanical inspiration was deficient" and in Powell, Sr.'s; fundamentalists "confused revelation with the book itself." Being mentored by Harris, Powell, Sr. developed his own theology and did not align it with the rigid doctrines of fundamentalism.

Powell, Sr. was greatly influenced by fellow classmates at Yale. His experiences helped to foster his theology by which he developed his ideas and beliefs about God, Jesus, Christianity, and liberation. He was thirty years of age when he began attending Yale and developing relationships with students and professors. Powell, Sr. was

---

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.


grounded in a faith enriched by the African-American heritage and religious experience. He was knowledgeable of pressing issues of the black community. During the end of his preparatory years in the ministry, Powell, Sr. emerged as an adept theologian.\textsuperscript{12} Powell, Sr. was able to adapt an unconventional theology that incorporated his experiences as an African American. In light of black theology, his theology adopted a theology of liberation.

During his pastorate at Immanuel Baptist, he was considered “one of the most gifted preachers of his day, and he was a manuscript preacher. He prepared his sermons in advance, carefully working them over. He worked on the last draft on Saturday and sometimes even Sunday morning.”\textsuperscript{13} Powell, Sr. began writing and publishing sermons. Gradually, he moved into the national and international arenas. His sermons and lectures such as, “The Stumbling Blocks of the Race” and “My Black Cat,” encouraged blacks to unite. In 1900, he attended the World’s Christian Endeavor Convention as a delegate to London. After returning from London, he pursued ecumenism in the United States, encouraged better race relations, and spoke to blacks about self-reliance, political protest, and economic development. He admired the work of Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass. Additionally, he participated with W.E.B. Du Bois in the Niagara

\textsuperscript{12} McNeil et. al., \textit{Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith}, 86-87.

Movement. Powell, Sr. communicated his belief in the necessity of “intelligent and many protests against the major wrongs from which the race is suffering.”¹⁴

In 1900, the Pan-African movement was launched at the London Pan-African Conference. African and Afro-American intelligentsia reacted to European imperialism and white racism. The Pan-African movement was influenced by Du Bois’ concept of Pan-Negroism, which was introduced in 1897. The initiative was promoted by Afro-West Indians, prominent among them Henry Sylvester Williams from Trinidad, who in November 1897 founded the first Pan-African organization, called the African Association, which at the 1900 Conference became known as the Pan-African Association.¹⁵ In light of the Pan-African movement and growing imperialism, Powell, Sr. began to apply his theology in a militant manner in advocating for the equality of blacks and associated their struggle with the struggle of people of color worldwide.

Powell, Sr.’s career and his confidence were rooted in fundamental beliefs about God, faith, liberation, and power. He embraced the belief that “faith in God and His Son Jesus Christ bring…us into vital contact with the source of power…Faith is the medium through which we get power to live, work, and accomplish what seems humanly impossible…‘God is able to do exceeding abundantly; above all we ask or think according to the power that worketh in us.’”¹⁶ In his ministerial career, Powel, Sr.

---

¹⁴ Ibid.


focused on the good news of salvation and the use of faith to help the poor and the oppressed while also encouraging black self-reliance. For Powell, Sr. it was important to understand the life of Jesus Christ in an effort to assist oppressed individuals. In his theology, Powell, Sr. infused some of the key components of black theology, which centered on Jesus Christ and focused on the oppressed, particularly the black community in Harlem.

In December 1908, Powell, Sr. accepted the pastorate of the Abyssinian Baptist Church of New York City. Abyssinian allowed him “the opportunity to feel the weight of...heavy obligations.” After serving fifteen years, Powell, Sr. made plans to resign his pastorate at the Immanuel Baptist Church of New Haven, Connecticut. His letter of resignation stated:

In the providence of our heavenly Father, I am called to a larger church, but not to a better city or better church. I am positive that the same Lord who sent me here is calling me to a larger field of service and feeling that I must obey Him now...I hereby resign...to become the pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church of New York City.” New York City was gaining a pastor of the gospel who was respected for his “manly personality, native preaching ability, a desire to broaden his knowledge and widen his horizon, and a passion for serving humanity.”

---


Powell, Sr. welcomed all individuals to his church. His preaching attracted "pimps, prostitutes, keepers of dives and gambling dens" to Christ. On March 5, 1909, Abyssinian installed Powell, Sr. as its new pastor and welcomed his family, Mrs. Mattie Fletcher Shaffer Powell, Blanche, and Powell, Jr. Powell, Sr. began to establish himself as a practitioner of the Social Gospel. His church constructed the Community House, a social center, and a home for the senior citizens. The Community House hosted training programs for religious teachers and Red Cross nurses. During the summer months, it hosted the largest youth vacation Bible school in New York. During the early 1900s, this era was known as the Progressive Period because new laws were passed, which led to government reform. In the words of historian Howard Zinn, "What was clear in this period to blacks, to feminists, to labor organizers and socialists, was that they could not count on the national government. True, this was the 'Progressive Period,' the start of the Age of Reform, but it was a reluctant reform, aimed at quieting the popular risings, not making fundamental changes." Powell, Sr. was convinced of his calling into the Christian ministry by God. He

---


21 Ibid.


spoke of having humility as it pertained to salvation and God’s grace. Often, he contemplated about Christ’s passion, suffering, and sacrifice.

The humanity of Jesus staggered under the awful gravity of His situation...Yet...He lifted his soul to heaven...in complete acceptance of the Father’s will, the hour to be bruised for man’s [and for woman’s] iniquity...Christ came to give the world, not a set of doctrines and creeds, but an example of perfect manhood. He was manifested in the flesh to show us what God is and what man ought to be...This is what the Gospel offers: eternal life. “I came,” says Jesus, “that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” 24

Powell, Sr. was able to relate Christ’s suffering to his ministry. Inevitably, Cone states that black theology highlights the life of Jesus, and freedom is connected to suffering. 25 Powell, Sr. demonstrated this element in his ministry. He connected Christ’s suffering with humility.

Powell, Sr. preached that “Jesus the Christ was the model and the spirit of love,” the ideal in “moral thought and character,” and the ideal in “humble service and living.” 26 Because of the living Christ and the living word, Powell, Sr. found it impossible to adopt fundamentalism. He preferred to be associated with theologians and clergy who called themselves progressives. His faith was profound, and he believed that “the Bible is more


than history, biography, rhetoric, poetry, botany, eloquence, tragedy, geology, zoology or astronomy; it is more than literature; it is a revelation from God, and the word of God is transformative.”

In the early 1900s, as the result of migrant problems, historians John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., state that blacks discovered their own formula for survival. Consequently, the church provided services to blacks. The conservative element of the church focused on denouncing the sins of people, and the progressive element refused to accept crude notions of Biblical interpretation. Educated African Americans rejected the church as the agency of salvation and focused on more immediate problems. The progressive development helped to improve the conditions in urban communities and also attracted educated African-American ministers. Since Powell, Sr. affiliated himself with progressive theologians, black theology reflected the theology of such radical theologians.

Powell, Sr. shared the scripture with others as a way to witness to them. He persuaded Christians to abide by the following: “Blessings that are not imparted lose half their value.” In his own conviction, he felt that Christians had to acknowledge that “the Spirit which Jesus brought to the world” demanded discipleship. A disciple needed to

27 Ibid., 93.


minimally meet a certain criteria. He preached that “if someone has spoken a kind word
to you, carry it to another. If you have tasted of His redeeming love, impart it to
another.”30 To be a Christian, he believed that “one fully embrace ‘the Spirit of good will
toward men’ and accompany it with the ‘practice...of doing unto others as you would
have them do unto you.”31

Overall, Powell, Sr. emphasized “kindness, sharing redemptive love, good will,
and treating others as one would like to be treated.”32 He valued such principles because
his theology was “contextual and existential in nature.”33 His theology was based on his
life, within the “black experience...in twentieth century urban America.”34 In one
sermon, he preached how literalism could mislead a Christian seeking to serve in a
modern world. He believed that scriptures should not be interpreted literally, but they
should be applicable to current life experiences.35

Jesus is our ideal in humble service and living. It was the virtue of humility that
Christ had in mind when He said, “I have given you an example that ye should do
as I have done to you.” What had Christ done? He had laid aside in heaven his
robes of uncreated majesty, come to earth, girded himself with a towel and
washed the soiled feet of men. When Christ says, “I have given you an example
that ye should do as I have done to you,” He does not mean that we are to go

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. “The Value of an Ideal,” in Palestine and Saints in Caesar’s
Household (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1939), 154, quoted in Genna Rae McNeil et. al, Witness: Two
Hundred Years of African-American Faith and Practice at the Abyssinian Baptist Church of Harlem, New
33 Ibid
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
about washing everybody’s feet, but that we are to serve in the spirit of humility which characterizes this humble but significant life of our Lord.\textsuperscript{36}

Powell, Sr. believed that every scripture in the Bible should not be taken in the literal sense, but scriptures should be taken in a prudent manner. Simply, scriptures should be applicable to circumstances in life.

Powell, Sr. came to New York City with ideas on the purpose of the church, ministry, missions, and the race. In his opinion, he thought that churches were obligated to serve and provide the needs of the black community. During his pastorate at Immanuel, he had become one of the first black Baptist clergymen who embraced the social gospel. He accepted the social gospel’s challenges for all churches and its mission for black churches.\textsuperscript{37}

The future usefulness of the church will depend upon her ability and versatility to adapt herself to the circumstances which are so rapidly forming about her...The question now...is, “What is the church doing for the amelioration of the condition of mankind?”...The hour is come for a concerted action of all the religious forces and factors...The responsibility of reaching...non-churchgoing millions rests upon the church...We are to win them, not as denominations, but as Christians...Again, the hour is come when the world expects the church to prepare men to live...The chief work, then of the church, is not to get men ready to die, but to get men ready to live.\textsuperscript{38}


\textsuperscript{37} McNeil et al., Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith, 94.

Cone argues that the true mission of the church needs to be reexamined. He states that “the black church is probably the only hope for renewal or, more appropriately, revolution in organized Christianity.” Specifically, he mission of the black church is to prepare individuals to not only survive but to succeed in society.

Powell, Sr.’s social gospel directed his members to “manifest the spirit of Jesus in their daily lives” and to serve the poor, disadvantaged as well as the unsaved. This service meant being involved in Christian service, being faithful, loving one another, offering assistance, motivating others, and fighting racial oppression. In a sermon that he often preached, Powell, Sr. spoke about his responsibility: “Every New Testament church must discover the real need of the people in the community in which it is located and do its utmost to supply those needs in the name and in the spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

With a conviction that the mission of black churches was to help the poor and to guide blacks into good stewardship, in 1911, Powell, Sr. wrote Booker T. Washington with a solution to tackling problems “by industry, education, and accumulation of property.”

---


41 Ibid.

While preaching the gospel, he promoted “racial uplift” and focused his message on Jesus Christ. He anchored his spirituality in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and the Gospel of Matthew. He highlighted Christ’s New Testament teachings to motivate people to follow Christ’s teachings. In his preaching, he inspired people to repent, to have faith, and to take action. Indeed, black theology emphasizes racial uplift in the black community. If Christ’s teachings are followed, helping others and helping oneself are critical to racial uplift.

According to Professor Henry Louis Gates, northern factories started increasing production before World War I; however, they encountered a labor shortage due to slow immigration and men joining the military. Southern African Americans responded by migrating to northern urban centers for a better life. This era was known as the Great Migration as a result of the migration of about one million black southerners to cities in the North, West, and Midwest.

Isabel Wilkerson, author of *The Warmth of Other Suns*, asserts that the Great Migration was a “statistically measurable demographic phenomenon marked by unabated outflows of black émigrés that lasted roughly from 1915 to 1975.” It peaked during the war years, swept a good portion of all the black people alive in the United States at the

---


time into a river that carried them to all point North and West. During the Great Migration, Powell, Sr. observed that “the migration differs from all others in that it has no visible leader.” He was convinced that black churches were obligated to accommodate the new migrants. In the life of the black migrant, the most important crisis was the absence of the church. The church was a haven for the black migrant because it was a protection from racism as well as providing a social life for the individual. Harlem was one place that black migrants began to settle, and Powell, Sr. envisioned the opportunities for blacks there. His mission was to construct a model church in Harlem that would serve the needs of the community.

In 1917 at a meeting in New York, Powell, Sr. insisted that black churches had an obligation to respond to the migrants, even though churches had “neither started this ‘cyclone-like movement’ nor exerted much influence over it.” Many black migrants chose to live in New York. In 1917, the flow of immigrants shifted the black population

46 Ibid.


48 Ibid.


50 McNeil et al., Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith, 111.

to Harlem. Powell, Sr. saw the shifting demographics of blacks toward Harlem. Abyssinian was convinced that a need existed to share the gospel to the black migrants in Harlem through sermons and Christian service uptown.

Powell, Sr. believed that the Baptist denomination should be committed to accommodating the needs of black Harlemites, particularly the needs of the migrants. During the Colored Baptist State Convention in New York, Powell, Sr. recommended creating “a great community center” to assist with the transition of southern migrants and to provide education for those “too old to enter public school.” Additionally, the church could aid in making black newcomers from the South “desirable and useful citizens.” He asserted that “a woman of Nannie Helen Burroughs’ vision could make this the greatest adult education center in the United States.” Under his watch, Abyssinian and other black churches served the new residents who moved to Harlem.

---


55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

Before the inception of black theology, Powell, Sr. adhered to its principles by serving the needs of the oppressed in Harlem.

Under President Wilson, the nation entered World War I in response to making the world “safe for democracy.”

Responding to W.E.B. Du Bois’ editorial, “Close Ranks,” and other public statements of black political leaders, Powell, Sr. joined other ministers in expressing an opposing opinion. The editorial, “Close Ranks,” encouraged African Americans to “forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy.”

In the New York Age, Powell, Sr. expressed his dissatisfaction with not fighting for democracy at home. He declared that “in spite of all the big Negroes are saying to the contrary, this is the psychological moment to demand our rights...Let us have the courage to say to white American people ‘Give [sic] us the same rights you enjoy then we will fight by your side with all our might for every international right on land and sea.”


60 Ibid.


In 1917 and 1918, Powell, Sr. had dual responsibilities as a pastor and civic leader. While he was able to demonstrate that blacks were patriotic as a result of the wartime activities of the church, “Powell’s pronouncements were indicative of prevailing views in the black church that suggested that America could not go on a world cleansing expedition with so much filth in her own borders and stressed the need to make democracy a fact and not a farce in America.” Powell was joined by other ministers in expressing similar views. Under his leadership, his members supported the troops, the war relief, and war bonds to demonstrate that African Americans were patriotic.

During the early 1900s, Powell, Sr. advocated for the rights of blacks to vote and to hold elected offices. He also fought to declare lynching a federal crime, to have the right to live where one could afford to live, to earn an income, to serve in the armed forces that prohibited racial discrimination, to protect and provide sufficiently for one’s family. Through all of his campaigns, he “affirmed the propriety of the role of the church.”

During the 1920s, black churches that embraced the social gospel were an essential component of the Harlem Renaissance. Black churches were “a component


65 McNeil et al., Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith, 112.
containing its own corpus of intellectuals, namely an educated and sophisticated black clergy."66 They were elitists and intellectuals who provided the theoretical meaning to the Renaissance. Accordingly, James Weldon Johnson sent a complimentary copy of God's Trombones to social gospel ministers, such as Powell, Sr. and he refused to send them to any storefront preachers whose "hypnotic religion" symbolized the Old Negro.67 Powell, Sr. spoke truth into the scriptures, which individuals could apply logically.

Powell, Sr. acknowledged the relationship of his vision and the social gospel ventures of clergy. He was a faithful ecumenist and supporter of improving race relations. He recognized that racial lines should not divide Christians in their efforts to "preach the gospel to every creature...[and] work...for the social betterment of the world."68 Therefore, he supported ecumenical and interracial alliances such as the international Christian Endeavor Society, the Students' Volunteer Movement, the Young Men's Christian Association, and the Salvation Army. He highlighted the work of

---


Abyssinian as providing assistance to the poor and to the good of society in press releases published by the *Crisis*, the *New York Age*, the *Amsterdam News*, the *New York Times*, *New York World*, *Tribune*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and *Harper’s Monthly*. Powell’s views were respected by fellow clergy. Because he often voiced his opinions on societal issues, other members of the clergy wanted to emulate him.

When Marcus Garvey arrived in Harlem, Abyssinian was still housed on Fortieth Street. After World War I, Abyssinian Baptist Church and Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) would play a vital role in the development of the Harlem community. Garvey’s proclamation was “race first, black pride, black enterprise, beauty in blackness, strength in black unity, and a proud heritage in the motherland, Africa.” Black self-assertion, self-determination, and pride attracted many blacks to Garvey’s UNIA. Powell, Sr. considered Garvey’s presence and his organizing among blacks “more significant to the Negro than the World War...With his Black president,...a Black cabinet...Black army with Black generals, Black cross nurses, Black *Negro World*, Black Star Line and a Black religion with a Black God...[He] awakened a race consciousness that made Harlem felt around the world.”

---

69 Ibid., 115.


71 Ibid.
"He is the only man that made Negroes not feel ashamed of their color." \(^{72}\)

Powell, Sr. was attracted to Marcus Garvey’s "black-and-proud philosophy." \(^{73}\) The Garvey movement profoundly influenced Harlem’s political development and the lives of the Powells. During the Garvey period, the push to make Harlem a Congressional District began. \(^{74}\) In 1914, Marcus Mosiah Garvey, a native of Jamaica, formed the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in Kingston, Jamaica. He was influenced by Booker T. Washington’s autobiography *Up from Slavery*, especially using Washington’s concept of promoting industrial education. He argued that all people of African descent should unite to overthrow white hegemony. In 1916, he traveled to New York where he established the New York division of the UNIA. In his speeches, he called "for black pride for "Africa for the Africans," and for African Americans to migrate to Africa. On the contrary, his "Back to Africa" message alienated many black civil rights leaders, such as Du Bois, A. Philip Randolph, Robert Abbott, and Cyril Briggs. \(^{75}\)

In 1909, the NAACP, a civil rights organization, was created by prominent social

---


reformers as a result of an increase in segregation laws. Garvey was particularly contemptuous of Du Bois and other NAACP leaders. Garvey wrote that "the NAACP wants us all to become white by amalgamation, but they are not honest enough to come out with the truth. To be a Negro is no disgrace, but an honor, and we of the UNIA do not want to become white...We are proud and honorable. We love our race and respect and adore our mothers." Clearly, Powell, Sr. embraced Garvey’s philosophy of black pride. He believed that blacks should have self-love. Black pride and black consciousness impacted the development of black theology.

Powell, Sr. understood that empowering blacks to help one another and to practice their faith in God benefited the race. Abyssinian met a variety of needs. In addition to providing spiritual guidance, it offered cultural programs which included poetry of the “Renaissance,” cultural lectures, and various activities in the Community House. Abyssinian sponsored events that focused discussions on religion, education, and the issues experienced by black people.

Powell, Sr. lived through the evolving economic predicament of blacks in New York. In the early years of his pastorate at Abyssinian, many black families were classified as the working poor. During the Great Depression, blacks experienced even

---


77 Franklin and Moss, Jr., *From Slavery Freedom*, 396.

more economic difficulties. Based on the economic plight of blacks, Powell, Sr. and other black leaders were compelled to address larger moral questions. They felt that race leaders and race organizations had a moral obligation to do more. Powell, Sr. began to question the black church’s obligation to meet the challenge of the economic depression. In providing aid, he focused more on the leadership among church leaders.\footnote{Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. \textit{Against the Tide: An Autobiography} (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1938), 220-231, quoted in Genna Rae McNeil et.al., \textit{Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith and Practice at the Abyssinian Baptist Church of Harlem, New York} (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 137.}

According to Lincoln and Mamiya, the Great Depression of 1929 had a devastating effect on blacks and on the social outreach activities sponsored by black churches.\footnote{C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, \textit{The Black Church in the African American Experience} (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 209.} Masses of blacks lost employment and faced evictions. Triggered from the Depression, “economic and unemployment situation illuminated the high cost of racism for New Yorkers of Color.”\footnote{Robert L. Adams, Jr., “Black Gotham: African Americans in New York City, 1900-2000,” \textit{Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power} 12 (2005): 373, quoted in Genna Rae McNeil et.al., \textit{Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith and Practice at the Abyssinian Baptist Church of Harlem, New York} (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 136.} The post-Renaissance in Harlem was marked by poverty, economic decline, unemployment, and inadequate housing.\footnote{Ibid.} Powell, Sr. urged clergy to provide the needs of their church members and black communities. He called churches “to examine their moral posture, more narrowly defined. Moreover, he declared that “this was a time for ‘Lifting Up a Standard for the People,’” [sic] purifying the pulpit,
disavowing all forms of corruption, and being models of morality." 83 Powell, Sr. wanted the black church to accept its responsibility in addressing the needs of the community, and particularly, he felt that black ministers had a moral responsibility in addressing such needs.

Before Powell, Sr. could continue to focus on addressing the economic needs of the community, his director of religious education, Horatio Hill, resigned. 84 To succeed Horatio Hill, the church looked to the son of Abyssinian, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. 85 After defining his own style, Powell accepted his call to ministry. After preaching his trial sermon on Good Friday in 1930, Powell received his license to preach from Abyssinian. After graduating from Colgate University in upstate New York in 1930, he embarked on a trip overseas and returned to New York to begin work in the fall. In 1930, Powell was appointed to the position of business manager and director of social and educational programs at Abyssinian. The father and son worked together to establish Abyssinian as a source of hope for the Harlem community. 86


85 Ibid.

In 1930, Powell, Sr. made the case for a humanitarian and Christian response to addressing critical community needs. He challenged black ministers and his congregation to respond. In his challenge, he emphasized black self-reliance. Consequently, the church welcomed the homeless to occupy its Community House. In one sermon, Powell, Sr. "urged all citizens to contribute their share toward relieving suffering...there are more men and women hungry in America today than ever before...In New York alone there are 35,000 Negro men and women out of work."\(^87\)

In 1930, Powell, Sr. decided that the church should respond to suffering, and soon after, he began a series of sermons based on the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew and God’s commandments concerning "the least of these."\(^88\) The sermons had such titles as "A Naked God" and "A Hungry God."\(^89\) In his sermons, he recognized that in "praying to God to clothe the naked and feed the hungry" he was "asking God to do something that

---


\(^89\) Ibid.
God had told Christians to do nineteen hundred years ago.” Powell, Sr. offered an interpretation of biblical texts regarding feeding the hungry. He equated feeding men with feeding God. “Jesus...paid as much attention to the feeding of men’s stomachs as to the feeding of their souls.” The pastor donated $1,000 to help the unemployed. He challenged his staff and churches members to do likewise. Cone indicates that “because the church knows that the world is where human beings are dehumanized, it can neither retreat from the world nor embrace it.” Being relevant in today’s society, Powell, Sr.’s sermon demonstrates that the church has a responsibility to assist disadvantaged individuals.

In partnership, father, son, the Abyssinian staff, and the congregation created the benevolence program at Abyssinian. Frequently, Powell, Sr. and his son met with New York businessmen. In the spirit of racial cooperation, they worked with wealthy white philanthropists to create economic opportunities for the entire community.

90 Ibid.
91 Ibid.

93 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 132.
Powell established relief measures. Powell, Sr. began to solicit assistance from black ministers to collaborate to work on relief programs for the disadvantaged blacks who were affected by the Depression.⁹⁵

In December 1930, Baptist lay leader, Nannie Helen Burroughs of Washington, D.C., challenged black pastors in a published opinion to address the suffering of blacks and give greater attention to addressing the needs of impoverished blacks as the result of the Depression. Powell, Sr. responded to the challenge. He recognized that especially blacks suffered as a result of the Depression and that his fellow clergy needed to take action. Powell, Sr. issued "a plea to the ministry for a united effort in relieving distress"⁹⁶ as a result of the devastating financial impact on blacks.⁹⁷

Abyssinian's tradition was a fabric of religious education and the Social Gospel. One of Powell, Sr.'s main objectives was to establish social justice.⁹⁸ Both Powell, Sr. and his son influenced the religious customs of Abyssinian. The son matured under his father's guidance, and his father frequently emphasized the importance of ministry to address the needs of the spirit, body, and mind. On the other hand, the son offered

---

⁹⁵ Ibid.


⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ McNeil et al., Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith, 144.
creative and innovative ideas.\textsuperscript{99}

When implemented through the church, their initiatives raised the level of service. During the Depression, Powell, Sr. encouraged his son to assist blacks in finding jobs. Under Powell’s leadership, many young Abyssinians became supporters of job campaigns and boycotts. Inspired by Powell, Sr. and his son, the youth of Abyssinian incorporated political activism into their lives. Through advocacy of social justice and Christian service, Abyssinian remained an instrument of salvation and a resource for many blacks.\textsuperscript{100} Under Powell, Sr.’s leadership, the congregation achieved its four main objectives: providing a model church for blacks, teaching blacks the value of reliability, improving race relations, and promoting social justice. These achievements attracted visitors from all over the world to study the church’s programs.\textsuperscript{101}

As a prominent black clergyman, Powell, Sr. influenced black attitudes and strategies toward racism and discrimination. In 1910, he was one of the founders of the Urban League and served on the first board of directors and as a vice president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Although he was a member of several black protest organizations, he generally favored a conciliatory

\begin{flushleft}
\footnotesize

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.

\end{flushleft}
approach to race relations and Booker T. Washington’s philosophy of self-help.\textsuperscript{102}

Whereas, Du Bois often criticized Washington’s accommodation philosophy and argued that such philosophy was a prescription for perpetual subordination.\textsuperscript{103}

In his autobiography, he wrote that in his lectures to whites he had asked only for one right for his race – “the right of equal opportunity with all other American people.”\textsuperscript{104}

He praised financial support of whites in supporting black colleges, churches, and social agencies. He condemned racial prejudice among both blacks and whites. He contended that the destiny of the races was “inextricably intertwined” in the United States. All races had a contribution to make to the other.\textsuperscript{105}

In \textit{The Souls of Black Folk}, Du Bois stated that blacks were separated by a veil from white society, and as a result, whites’ image of blacks was distorted. He discussed how the color line forced blacks to move in difficult psychological terrain.\textsuperscript{106}

Unfortunately, whites did not view blacks as being equal to them. He asserted that “the


\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.

Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”

These dual identities became “two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

In his autobiography, Against the Tides, Powell, Sr. discussed that blacks and whites might not agree on everything, but they should be able to coexist. He explained that “the white man cannot keep the Negro down without staying down himself. If the white people are to rise to the heights God wants them to reach, they must give the colored people the opportunity to climb with them...The only thing to do is to decide how they can get along with the least friction.”

In 1939, Powell, Sr. wrote Palestine and Saints in Caesar’s Household, which he discussed how God wanted all churches to be modeled after the first church. In the second chapter of Acts, a model church was presented, which Powell asserted that the model church was organized by the “direction of Jesus and was vitalized and electrified by the burning presence of the Holy Spirit.” He argued that the current churches were

---


110 Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. Palestine and Saints in Caesar’s Household (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1939), 129.
substandard as compared to the qualifications of the first church in Jerusalem. In a
model church, he stated that congregants should assume their stewardship, which
indicated that ownership was vested in another. Stewardship implied ownership, which
involved responsibility. He expressed that the church’s duty was to meet the needs of the
community, “whether those needs be social, economic, or spiritual.” He believed that
the church was responsible in assisting individuals in becoming economically efficient as
well as spiritually fervent.

Powell, Sr.’s prudence and effective communication helped to propel Abyssinian
to advance. As one member described Powell, Sr., he was not simply a “dynamic
speaker.” He “was able to explain things and to grab your imagination.”

Unquestionably, he promoted Abyssinian as the “model church” and encouraged his
members to serve in the church’s ministries. He said that “work is the only remedy for
physical, mental, moral and spiritual ease…Tackle any work for God and humanity in the

\[\text{\cite{111}}\]

\[\text{\cite{112}}\]

\[\text{\cite{113}}\]

\[\text{\cite{114}}\]

\[\text{\cite{115}}\]

\[\text{\cite{116}}\]
community and ‘let your light shine everywhere that men may see your good works’ and you will find yourself becoming strong in the Lord and the power of His might.”¹¹⁷

The Sermons of Powell, Sr.

Importantly, in examining Powell, Sr.’s sermons, the tenets of black theology permeate through them. The sermons illustrate his fight for liberation of African Americans. He used his sermons to motivate the oppressed in society. Some of Powell, Sr.’s sermons in the early 1920s addressed the mistreatment of African Americans, particularly, African-American soldiers returning home after World War I. Powell believed that whites should value the economic independence of African Americans, especially since many of them served in a segregated military. If the races were fighting together, Powell thought that this interaction would lead to an inclusive concept of Americanism.¹¹⁸

While serving in World War I, African-American soldiers encountered racism and were relegated to segregated units.¹¹⁹ When African-Americans soldiers served in Europe, many were hesitant about losing what democracy and freedom they had abroad when they returned to the United States. They wanted to move into democratic living.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Ibid.


¹²⁰ Franklin and Moss, Jr., From Slavery Freedom, 383-384.
When they returned to the United States, African-American soldiers continued to face racism. Powell delivered the following sermon during the post-World War I. In 1921, Powell, Sr. preached "The Kind of Christianity Needed to Reconstruct the World" at Abyssinian Baptist Church. In his sermon, Powell, Sr. proclaimed that America could not teach Christianity to other nations when racism was practiced domestically.

Virtually, he stated that America was being a hypocrite in practicing its democracy, which did not apply to blacks. In affirmation, Cone states that "in America, at least, the Christian tradition is identified with the structures of racism in their oppression of black people." Powell, Sr., preached the following:

For more than four years practically all of the civilized nations were involved in the most destructive war since the dawn of time...the material damage, though tremendous, is small compared to the havoc wrought in the social and moral structure of the world. The wheels of civilization were turned backward so suddenly that the world, if ever, will not recover from the wreck and ruin in a hundred and fifty years. Humanity must now resolutely face the task of clearing away the wreck and rubbish and of rebuilding a new economic, moral and spiritual world. The fact must ever be kept in mind that reconstruction requires a hundredfold more time, patience and wisdom than destruction...Men and women of serious minds are asking, "Is there enough justice, charity and wisdom left in the world to heal the wounds and to rebuild civilization, so as to make impossible a repetition of the awful tragedy which recently deluged the world in blood, and almost destroyed the goodwill toward men the Angels sang about over the verdant hills of Judea two thousand years ago?"...Our own America should never send another missionary to preach the gospel to non-Christian nations until her pulpit has the courage to make a serious attempt to stop the lynching and the burning of men, women and unborn children at home...Our denominational boards should not attempt to build another school or church in heathen countries until they have used their influence to the utmost to stop mobs from burning churches and school houses in this land of the free and home of the brave. This leads me to say that the only kind of Christianity that will ever make this world in general, and America in particular, a safe place in which to live, is the Christianity of Jesus. By the Christianity of Jesus, I mean that kind of Christianity that goes among

---

121 Cone, Risks of Faith, 31.
individuals, races and nations doing good in His name and spirit – that kind of Christianity that treats the race or group lowest down with the same kindly spirit it manifests toward the one highest up... We must honestly confess that the Christianity of men has woefully failed, but the Christianity of Jesus has not failed, for the good and sufficient reason that it has never been tried by a single race or nation on earth.... 122

Powell, Sr. preached “The Attitudes of Jesus Toward World Problems” at a mass meeting of the NAACP at the St. Mark’s A.M.E. Church in New York on January 3, 1932. In his sermon, Powell, Sr. articulated the dilemma that America faced, which was discriminating against people of color. He also indicated that the church was not practicing the Christianity of Jesus. In Palestine and Saints in Caesar’s Household, Powell, Sr. believed that “God wants us to model all our churches after the pattern of that first church. Let any local church today compare the qualifications of its members with the qualifications of those who constituted the first church at Jerusalem.”123 Powell, Sr. contended that churches were not practicing Christianity as the church that God ordained. Presumably, he believed that churches had deviated from their true mission. Cone supports this assertion by stating that “the inability of American theology to define human nature in the light of the Oppressed One and of particular oppressed peoples stems from its identity with the structures of white power.”124


123 Powell, Sr. Palestine and Saints, 129.

124 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 86.
Presumably, American theology failed in its capacity to provide guidance on solving moral issues. In his sermon, Powell, Sr. made it clear that equality for all should prevail:

I am not disposed to cast any reflection upon my Fundamentalist brethren, but the fact remains that the nearer a preacher and his church get to fundamentalism, the further they get from social justice, from God and the Brotherhood of Man, as preached by Jesus...The Church is so blind when it comes to the proper attitudes of Jesus that its best writers fail to see these attitudes, or intentionally ignore them...Jesus is clearly and unconditionally opposed to the selfish use of wealth...There is bound to be a more equal distribution of wealth if we are going to stave off an economic world revolution that will make all other revolutions look like a dog fight in a backyard...The position of Jesus is not only clear on the problem of labor and capital, but it is unmistakably clear on the race question...In His very first sermon, Jesus exploded their race superiority complex by showing that God had no respect of persons or races...In God’s eye view, there are no “superior races.” They are all His children, “created out of one blood to dwell upon the face of the earth,” and should be given an equal opportunity to “work out their own social salvation with fear and trembling.”...Our nation has the reputation of being the strongest nation in the world, but it was never weaker than now...The struggle of the ages is the struggle for national freedom, national independence, national self-direction and universal equality...What the masses want is not relativity, but social righteousness. What the masses want is not modernity, but meat and bread.125

Powell, Sr. believed that the church and its members had a reciprocal responsibility. Both were accountable to each other. In April 1936 at the Baptist Ministers’ Conference, Powell, Sr. delivered the sermon, “What Has the Church Done for the Negro and What Will the Negro Do for the Church?” In supporting Powell, Sr.’s remarks, Cone asserts that “the black church was the creation of a black people whose daily existence was an encounter with the overwhelming and brutalizing reality of white

power. For the slaves, it was the sole source of personal identity and the sense of community...The black churchman did not accept white interpretations of Christianity, which suggested the gospel was concerned with freedom of the soul and not the body."^{126} The black church has been the cornerstone of African-American life. The black church has inspired its congregants and its community to be hopeful in crises, to rejoice in good times, and to find refuge.

I would say first, that the Church has taught the Negro the technique of organization...It was the first work of the Negro church to unite the scattered and antagonistic groups, teach them to make motions, elect officers, form churches, conferences, associations and conventions...You may say that the Negro Church is poorly organized, but you will have to admit that it is the best and biggest the Race has...The Abyssinian Baptist Church is a pledge and promise of what the Negro Church can do along the line of organization...The Church was the first organization to furnish the Negro with a social meeting place...The church is the only place where all Negroes meet on an equal social plan...There are just two methods of conquest. One is by physical might and the other is by spiritual meekness...Jesus was the ancient exponent of spiritual meekness. Jesus advocated the policy of non-resistance...Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois cannot be considered a friend either of the Negro minister or of the Negro church, but in one of his books he makes this frank acknowledgment of the Negro minister's power and influence: "The preacher is the most unique personality developed by the negro on American soil – A leader, a politician, an orator, a boss, an intriguer, and idealist – all these he is, and ever too, the center of a group of men now twenty, now a thousand in number. A combination of a certain adroitness with deep-seated earnestness, of tact with consummate ability gave him his preeminence and helps him maintain it." Dr. Du Bois is right. Despite the fact the Negro minister's leadership is being keenly, and at times, fiercely challenged, he still maintains his preeminence in this field and he will for many years to come...Only God can save this race and this world through some great leader like Jesus Christ who will speak his mind. That leader is already born and this generation will hear his voice crying in the wilderness of our world's injustice, want and misery...The Negro church is the only church in America that is free to follow Jesus.^{127}

^{126} Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 92-93.

^{127} Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., “What Has the Church Done for the Negro and What Will the Negro Do for the Church?” sermon, April 1936, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.
In Powell, Sr.’s book, *Riots and Ruins*, he stated that a black person’s position in America was misunderstood. Blacks were victims of Jim Crow with limited citizenship. He mentioned that a race problem was prevalent, and blacks only wanted equal opportunity. He argued that “until this is done, there are going to be riots, ruin, and hell.” Powell contends that black theology “believes that the problem of racism will not be solved through talk but through action. Therefore, its task is to carve out a revolutionary theology based on relevant involvement in the world of racism.” Powell, Sr. was calling attention to the race problem in the United States, and he declared that action was needed to be taken immediately. He was a theologian who was ahead of his time. He was a progressive theologian who believed in being proactive in addressing the problems that were present his church, his community, the nation, and the world. Undeniably, he was a renaissance man.

The Early Years of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.

Powell, the second child of Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., a Baptist minister, and Mattie Powell, was born on November 29, 1908 in New Haven, Connecticut. In November 1908, Powell, Sr. accepted a senior pastorate at Abyssinian Baptist Church on West 40th Street in New York City, which was then one of the largest black congregations in the world. In the northern cities, the churches were much larger than

---


the churches in the South. The black preacher in the northern city grew large churches which measured his status and influence as well as his control of economic resources. These churches were social organizations with departments related to many aspects of black life. In December 1908, the Powells moved from New Haven to New York.

During World War I, whites emigrated from Harlem, and African Americans began their migration to Harlem. The artistic community began to form in Harlem, which resulted into a renaissance. The religious community also relocated to Harlem, and Powell, Sr. envisioned the future of Abyssinian in Harlem. In 1916, Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican, launched a Pan-Africanism movement, and based on his philosophy, Powell, Sr. predicted an economic explosion in Harlem. In Adam by Adam, Powell described Garvey as the “Black President” and how he gave blacks a sense of pride. Harlem became the “Black Mecca” as a consequence of Garvey’s teachings, and Powell, Sr. exclaimed, “Let’s go to Harlem and see the Black Moses.” Harlem became “the


135 Ibid.

symbol of liberty and the Promised land" for black people.\textsuperscript{137} In time, Abyssinian grew, and Powell Sr.'s stature also grew in Harlem. As a renowned speaker and community leader, he advocated for a better quality of life for Harlem residents. As an NAACP leader, he protested to get white businesses and the City of New York to hire more blacks.\textsuperscript{138}

Early in his life, Powell developed a lung condition, which required medical treatment for many years. In a segregated society, the Powells were considered to be upper-class blacks. During his adolescent years, Powell was a student at P.S. 5 and eventually a student at Townsend Harris High School. During his undergraduate years at the City College of New York (CCNY), he spent more time indulging in extracurricular activities rather than cultivating his academic life. Moreover, as a result of his sister, Blanche's death, his grades declined, and subsequently, he withdrew from school, his parents as well as the church.

Consequently, CCNY expelled Powell as a result of a blemished academic record, and soon after, he enrolled in Colgate University.\textsuperscript{139} Since Colgate was located in an isolated town in upstate NY, Powell's social life was possibly hampered; however, he viewed this opportunity as a way to pursue his calling in life. During his undergraduate years, Powell met and fell in love with Isabel Washington.\textsuperscript{140} Isabel was a featured

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{138} Powell, \textit{Adam by Adam}: 9.


\textsuperscript{140} Hamilton, \textit{Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography}, 49-51.
singer at local night clubs in New York.\textsuperscript{141} The result of "divine revelation" led Powell to forfeit a medical career to be become a minister. During his senior year in 1930 at Abyssinian, he preached his first trial sermon.\textsuperscript{142}

The Theology of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.

Powell championed the oppressed individuals who lived among the margins in his community. Although he never experienced living on the margins as a minister, he witnessed its devastating effects in the Harlem community. In his social activism, Powell was mostly influenced by his father, who considered the church "a mighty weapon" for attaining social justice.\textsuperscript{143} The first source of black theology was found in the black community where the tradition of black theology was often infused in the social justice rhetoric of Powell. Black theology provided the "sources for radical movements in the black community, while the organized church receded into white evangelical pietism."\textsuperscript{144}

Powell regarded the injustices in history as self-evident. He considered the life of the organized church in America to be hypocritical and guilty of the same type of sin of

\textsuperscript{141} "Rev. Powell, Jr. to Wed Isabel Washington," March 8, 1933, The Isabel Washington Powell Papers, Amistad Research Center Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.

\textsuperscript{142} Hamilton, \textit{Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography}, 51.


which Jesus accused the Pharisees.\textsuperscript{145} If liberation existed, it was the antithesis of captivity, which God opposed. In relation to black theology, Powell disagreed with the constructs of the organized church because it lacked the true mission of being Christ-centered.

When a person acknowledged sin and became aware of God’s salvation, Powell argued that the individual then became a recipient of freedom that humanity was intended to experience.\textsuperscript{146} To attain the awareness of God, a person needed to eradicate all hatred toward his or her neighbors. Often times, Powell criticized, what he called, the “white man’s religion.”\textsuperscript{147}

This drawing near to God, this increasing awareness, cannot be accomplished, nor even the steps be taken, until one has purged himself of all hatred toward all fellow men. This is why I view askance the average white man’s religion; and in this religion of his I include not just his church but the whole priesthood of believers and of preachers, his institutions of theological learning and his outer projection of his religion into community and world life. There is absolutely no Christianity of any type in any church where there is not active and equal participation at every level of church life and every level of religious institutions by all the sons of God. When for any reason whatsoever any participation of any member of the family of God is prohibited at any level, then there is no Christianity present, regardless of pretensions.\textsuperscript{148}

Essentially, if a person harbored evil toward humanity, Powell argued that a person could not claim to be a Christian. Within the context of black theology, God would not


\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 149.


\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
condone acts of oppression, particularly against African Americans.

Powell's concern for freedom was paramount in his theology and in his political ideology. He appreciated the fact that the framers of the Declaration of Independence recognized the religious source of freedom by acknowledging that every person had the right to liberty, which was given by God. He argued that the nation's founders did not grant liberty to the citizenry. They acknowledged it as a fact of human nature given by God. He considered that freedom was of God and was not of humans. Unquestionably, black theology supports an individual's freedom because it is ordained by God.

Powell believed that the break between the will of God and the powers of humanity meant that God was not controlled by human will. Moreover, it meant that superficial conditions constructed by humanity did not apply to God. He instructed the Christian church to lead people back to the truth by persuading them to commit themselves to "God who is raceless, classless, regionless, and absolutely free." To illustrate the philosophy of black power, Theodore Walker, Jr. cites Peter Paris as stating that Powell spoke in the language of black power. Publicly, Powell identified with the Black Power movement. Powell rejected violence and believed that civil

---

149 Paris, 150-151.


151 Ibid.
disobedience would assist in combating unjust laws.\textsuperscript{152} Assuredly, Powell "viewed his entire political philosophy as commensurate with the black power thrust save for its implications regarding violence. Theologically, Powell looked on black power as being consistent with the will of God."\textsuperscript{153} In addition, Powell was one of the first African-American Christian leaders to apply the philosophy of black power to civil rights for African Americans.\textsuperscript{154} Powell applied black theology in examining the problems of humanity. Powell used black theology in delivering messages of social justice in fighting for the oppressed community.

After graduating from Colgate University in June 1930, he received his preaching license and began his career as a preacher. Soon after graduating from Colgate, Powell sailed for Europe; the trip was a graduation gift from his father. When he returned, Harlem had changed significantly between 1926 and the fall of 1930 as a result of the Great Depression. During the Depression, Powell, the new business manager of the church, began to administer the work relief bureau for Harlem, which operated in the church's basement.\textsuperscript{155} During October and November of 1930, he responded to the economic conditions of New Yorkers. He started Abyssinian's Free Food Kitchen and Relief Bureau. His goal was to exemplify how he wanted others to think about being


\textsuperscript{153} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{155} Haygood, 23, 25.
benevolent. He started a soup kitchen at Abyssinian Baptist church, and he also incurred the costs to operate it. During the 1930s, Harlem residents were devastated due to the Depression, and many residents were unemployed. Trying to alleviate the crisis, Powell persuaded deans of industry to allot weekly sums of money for food to Harlem's disadvantaged residents. A welfare system did not exist, so Abyssinian served as the headquarters for the dispensing of food and jobs. With funds and contributions from grocery stores, Abyssinian was able to feed a thousand people a day.

The Depression impacted many blacks who could not afford to pay their rent and eventually were evicted from their apartments. Powell began to organize the tenants in different buildings. Because of his organizing efforts, the tenants agreed that no tenant would pay rent if one family was evicted. Because of Powell's activism, the evictions ceased, and families began to inhabit their apartments again. Later, the Consolidated Tenants League was founded by one of Powell's coworkers, which prohibited landlords from unjustly evicting tenants.

Like his father, Powell not only led and organized people but also exemplified how others should give. While working full-time and pursuing graduate studies at Union

---

156 McNeil et. al., Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith, 158.


Theological seminary and then at Columbia University, Powell pledged 10 percent of his salary towards the church’s relief efforts. John D. Rockefeller and Seward Prosser, a banker philanthropist, were among the most well-known donors. Powell worked particularly with the Harlem’s Prosser Committee to ensure that aid was being distributed equitably to the needy.\textsuperscript{160}

With changing demographics in Harlem and the needs of blacks, Powell became confident about the direction of his ministry. He told one of his Colgate classmates that his intent was to be a minister who would drive things beyond the “economic independence” of his father’s preaching for economic justice. Earlier in his ministry he combined the concepts of the social gospel with New York City progressive politics to advocate for the political and economic welfare of Harlem residents. He strongly believed that he was ordained to do God’s work and to help create a “new earth.”\textsuperscript{161} In 1931, accepting his true calling, Powell was ordained as a minister at Abyssinian Baptist Church.\textsuperscript{162}


\textsuperscript{162} “Rev. Powell Sees Son Ordained Minister,” \textit{The Chicago Defender}, May 2, 1931.
While serving as the church’s business manager and director of social and educational programming, Powell gained unexpected popularity. Under Powell’s leadership, Abyssinian’s Community House offered programs through the federal government’s Works Progress Administration (WPA). The adult education program sponsored classes reading, computation, and writing. The church also sponsored chemistry, cosmetics, French, Spanish, dressmaking, homemaking, art, English, Negro History, and bookkeeping classes. The program was instrumental in employing some of Harlem’s teachers in teaching such classes. Powell was determined to ensure that his members and the Harlem community were equipped to improve their lives by providing services that would enhance their employment opportunities. He viewed economic security as a way of being liberated.

Although Powell began theological studies at Union Theological Seminary, he eventually attained a master’s degree in religious education at Columbia’s Teachers College. On March 8, 1933, Powell married his long-time girlfriend, Isabel Washington, at the Abyssinian Baptist Church. Isabel was rated as an up-and-coming successful Broadway entertainer and thereafter, abandoned the entertainment business

---

163 McNeil et. al., Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith, 159.


165 Powell, Jr., Adam by Adam, 37.

166 Haygood, 29.
after her marriage.167 During their marriage, Isabel admitted that Abyssinian was Powell’s core, which was “the belly of the fight for civil rights.”168 The couple worked diligently to increase the church’s membership and its visibility in the community. Their demands on local businesses to employ more blacks resulted in repercussions across the state of New York. Powell appreciated the close connection between Abyssinian and the promotion for civil rights.169 Through nonviolent direct action, Powell was the first to organize the black population in Manhattan into a political force. Constantly, Powell threatened mass action if better living conditions and more jobs for blacks were not provided.170 Powell’s visibility as a dependable leader was becoming apparent in the Harlem community.

By 1930, Wilkerson revealed that approximately 165,000 blacks were living in Harlem.171 Harlem exploded in a race riot on March 19, 1935, which resulted in severe violence and damages.172 In 1935, another incident occurred in Harlem when a Puerto Rican boy was the victim of police brutality; however, this uprising was a mere rumor.

---


169 Ibid.


171 Wilkerson, 249.

In identifying the reason for the riot, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia appointed a biracial commission to investigate this alleged brutality. District Attorney William C. Dodge concluded that the Communists were the root of the insurgence. He ordered the closing of the Communist Party and the Liberators headquarters in Harlem. Since “Red-baiting” was a contemporary issue, the New York Post invited Powell to write three articles commenting on the rioting.173

According to scholars John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, in 1932, many African Americans hesitated in deserting the Republican Party, and few were not acquainted with Franklin D. Roosevelt. They feared that the outcome of a Democratic victory would lead to the ascendency of southern politicians in Washington. Reluctantly, African Americans endorsed a Democratic for president. In the 1930s, a small number of African Americans were attracted to the Communist Party. In the 1930s and 1940s, the Communist Party claimed that they promoted civil rights.174

On the Sunday following the riot, Powell delivered an unforgettable sermon. The Black Ides of March was his subject, and he explained why the riot occurred and why Harlemites reacted to the riot. The New York Times printed excerpts of his sermon and interviewed him, which highlighted his emergence as a leader.175 Powell was able to connect his struggle with the black church and with the claim of Jesus that he came to

---

174 Franklin and Moss, Jr., From Slavery Freedom, 425-426.
175 Chapman and Chapman, 53.
liberate the oppressed. Seemingly, Cone supports Powell’s theology as being aligned with one of the principles of black theology, which is to conduct an analysis of the gospel of Jesus Christ in considering the oppression of blacks “so they will see the gospel as inseparable from their humiliated condition and oppression.”

In New York City, as a result of segregation, Harlem Hospital was the only hospital that served the black patients. Black physicians did not receive challenging assignments, and black nurses also experienced a segregated work environment. A black physician, Conrad Vincent, was an advocate for the black employees who also demanded that black patients receive adequate care at the hospital. Because Powell received attention for his protesting efforts in Harlem and also in the Scottsboro case, Vincent solicited his help. In 1930, Conrad Vincent and four other physicians met with Powell to inform him that they were dismissed from the hospital. They told Powell, “We need you, a flaming tongue, to fight our battle.” Powell complained to New York City’s Mayor, John O’Brien about the conditions at Harlem Hospital. In investigating

176 Cone, Risks of Faith, 127.
177 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 5.
178 Haygood, 34.
180 Haygood, 35.
Vincent’s complaints, the NAACP appointed a committee that included Powell, Sr. and the director of surgery, Louis Wright.181

Powell organized the Committee on Harlem Hospital and held a mass meeting. On April 21, 1933, Powell marched along with supporters to City Hall. He made a speech that ignited the crowd and demanded a meeting with the mayor. Powell and a small delegation were permitted to meet with acting Mayor John O’Brien.182 He experienced an “Abyssinian moment” after his meeting with the mayor. He had learned from his mother about the church’s tradition of servant-ministry. He later explained, “Something happened to me. The people of the streets, the failures, the misfits, the despised, the maimed, the beaten, the sightless, and the voiceless had made a captive of me…and I was to know no other love but these people.”183 Powell developed a relationship with working-class blacks, which was based on support and mutual love.184 Powell was thrust into early civil rights activism, and the Harlem community knew that they could rely on him to take immediate action against unfair practices.

Powell attracted 6,000 protestors from Abyssinian and the community to march.

181 McNeil et al., Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith, 161.


184 McNeil et al., Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith, 161.
on City Hall. Powell stood before the Board of Estimate and stated the group’s
demands.\textsuperscript{185} Before the Board of Estimate, Powell demanded larger representation of
physicians from different ethnic groups and nurses in executive positions.\textsuperscript{186} An
investigation was launched, and the doctors who were dismissed were reinstated;
additionally, a black director was appointed. Powell was able to assist Harlemites to
realize their own power and potential in making a change.\textsuperscript{187} Early on, Powell cultivated
the church’s role to serve the underclass and to fight for equality for blacks.

Powell worked tirelessly to help Abyssinian to stay true to its mission of social
justice. Under Powell’s leadership, Abyssinians were committed to creating God’s
“kingdom come” by working to create a “new earth” where individuals would be treated
equally and to accept their divine purpose in life.\textsuperscript{188} Once Powell admitted to a reporter,
“I knew we had within our hands a powerful weapon that could shake the earth – a
weapon which if disciplined and mastered would cut through the false democratic veneer
of America into the rotting cancer of racial prejudice. We were marching up freedom
road now and there wasn’t anybody to stop us.”\textsuperscript{189} The black church was instrumental in

\textsuperscript{185} Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., \textit{Adam by Adam: The Autobiography of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.}

\textsuperscript{186} “New York Citizens March on Mayor in Harlem Hospital Row,” \textit{The Chicago Defender}, April 29, 1933, accessed May 27, 2014, \url{http://search.proquest.com/docview/492387128?accountid=8422}.

\textsuperscript{187} McNeil et al., \textit{Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith}, 161.

\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 162.

\textsuperscript{189} Claude Lewis, \textit{Adam Clayton Powell} (Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, 1963), 41-42.
honoring and developing his leadership, which allowed him to move "out of the pulpit into the streets on behalf of a just society." According to Isabel Washington Powell, the church was the foundation of Powell's politics. Before presenting new proposals to the council, first, he would preach it to the Abyssinian congregation.

During the early 1930s, a department of public welfare did not exist in the city of New York. Financiers Seward Prosser and Harvey Gibson organized a Citizens' Committee. In the spring of 1932, they met with Powell at one of the banking houses of Wall Street. They endorsed Powell's proposal in establishing the committee headquarters in the church. They were able to set up the first relief program in New York City. Dr. W. Adrian Freeman, a surgeon and member of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, gave Powell an idea to organize a rent strike. Powell developed a technique where he would canvass the streets in an effort to identify an evicted family. When he located one, he had a protest committee member visit the building's owner, saying, "put that family back in their home or we will have every family in the building refuse to pay their rent."

Starting in 1935, Powell wrote a column called "Soap Box" for the New York Amsterdam News. In his column, he attacked racial discrimination where he could identify it. In the late 1930s, Powell became the leading force behind the Greater New


192 Powell, Jr., *Adam by Adam*, 59, 61.

York Coordinating Committee for Employment (GYNCC). The organization focused not only on the local stores but also on the discriminatory public utilities, particularly the electric and telephone companies.\textsuperscript{194} Since it was considered as an extension of the church's social justice mission, the committee met at Abyssinian Baptist Church. The "vast membership of the church, over ten thousand, always stood as the united primary task force to give the initial backing to Powell's mass meetings and to spearhead the initiation of any worthwhile cause."\textsuperscript{195} With Abyssinian's commitment to social justice combined with the strength of the Coordinating Committee, conditions improved for Harlem residents.\textsuperscript{196}

As the GNCC gained national visibility, Powell joined the speaking circuit. His reputation as an activist minister grew, and his activities were reported in the national black newspapers: the \textit{Pittsburgh Courier}, the \textit{Chicago Defender}, the \textit{Baltimore Afro-American}, the \textit{Kansas City Call}. His core message focused on condemning racial segregation and discrimination. It also included appealing to the black churches to become leaders and to align themselves with liberal social forces on the political spectrum.\textsuperscript{197} He allowed a number of causes to borrow his name. He was involved in a

\textsuperscript{194} Hamilton, \textit{Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography}, 95.


\textsuperscript{196} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{197} Hamilton, \textit{Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography}, 97-98.
number of organizations, such as the National Committee to Boycott German Products, and encouraged his congregants to contribute funds to help Jewish refugees.\textsuperscript{198} Powell believed that blacks could experience freedom through economic security.\textsuperscript{199}

Abyssinian became the heart of considerable social protest.\textsuperscript{200} With Reverend John Johnson of St. Martin's Episcopal Church, Powell, Sr. and labor activist Sufi Hamid, Powell, Jr., instituted the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work campaign."\textsuperscript{201} Powell organized Harlemites and Abyssinians to picket stores on 125\textsuperscript{th} Street. He would approach the store's owner to employ blacks as clerks or in retail sales. This strategy of direct action was very successful. Powell and his supporters were able to disrupt business at ten stores. Eventually, the stores agreed immediately to change their discriminatory policies and to hire black women as clerks. Thereafter, they targeted utility and transportation services in successfully desegregating the workforce in the Harlem community.\textsuperscript{202}


\textsuperscript{199} Lewis, 44.


\textsuperscript{201} Aberjhani and West, \textit{Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance}, 269.

Another issue that existed in Harlem was the working conditions of black pharmacists. Many New York black pharmacists were unemployed. The Coordinating Committee launched a picketing campaign against the pharmacies to hire black pharmacists. The committee was able to get black pharmacists employed in Harlem.203 In a documentary, Dr. Lenworth Gunther states that “to understand Powell, is to understand how the black church could be used as it would later be used in the 1950s and in the 1960s. In that sense, he was an antecedent to the Civil Rights Movement, but far more than an antecedent, he was an individual who demonstrated the power of the church as a protest instrument, the power of the church as a social instrument, the power of the church as a community organizing instrument, and the power of the church as a political instrument.”204 Powell often said that “I am what I am, because of the Abyssinian Church….The church is my first love. No individual, no honor, no group could ever come between the membership and me.”205

In September 1937, Powell’s father resigned from the pastorate and was appointed pastor emeritus.206 For years, Powell, Sr. prepared his son to be his successor.

---

203 Powell, Jr., *Adam by Adam*, 65.


206 Powell, Jr., *Adam by Adam*, 53.
He introduced him to black leaders such as Mary McLeod Bethune and Nannie Burroughs, who were civil rights activists. On November 1, 1937, Powell became the seventeenth pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church. Since birth, Powell was known as the son of Abyssinian. Powell once stated, “I intended to fashion that church into a mighty weapon, keen edged, and sharp pointed. I intended to move the people out of the church to where God was – along the avenues and up the byways where hundreds of thousands were languishing in hopeless squalor.”

As senior pastor, Powell continued his fight for economic justice and racial integration, which he believed was fundamental to the Christian mission. He introduced specific church reforms that deviated from the old tradition of only serving the spiritual needs of parishioners. He started a nursery for children, established a federal credit union, and a consumer’s cooperative in Harlem that had 250 shareholders. Powell possessed political ambition and created a politico-religious base of power.

207 Haygood, 57.
208 McNeil et al., Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith, 152.
209 Lewis, 44.
Powell drew on favors owed to his father and on the assistance of numerous ministers who were trained by Powell, Sr. For political aspirations, he relied greatly on Abyssinian's financial and human resources of his congregation.213

Newspapers such as the New York Age and the Pittsburgh Courier illustrated that Abyssinians were expanding their ministry beyond Sundays. Abyssinians recognized that racism existed not only in the United States but beyond its borders. Globally, people of color were being oppressed by their societies, and their civil rights were being denied. Abyssinian was called to action to provide resources to such oppressed individuals. Ultimately, Abyssinians realized that racial oppression presented implications for Christianity and for church life. In his 1937 “Soap Box” editorial he declared that “unless the church starts forgetting the concept of race in practice as well as in theory, then Christianity is a dying religion. The church’s success depends on the concept that race should be eliminated and individuals should recognize each other’s true worth.”214

Under Powell’s leadership, the Coordinating Committee made enormous progress. He stated that “the Coordinating Committee became so powerful that the president of the uptown Chamber of Commerce, Colonel Leopold Philip, for the first


time in United States history, signed a contract with the consumer guaranteeing employment of the consumer."\textsuperscript{215} Others considered the success of the Coordinating Committee and decided to join their efforts.\textsuperscript{216} In the late 1930s, the beverage industry refused to hire black salesmen in Harlem. In 1938, Powell organized the "Cork and Bottle Club," which consisted of black representatives of companies conducting business in Harlem.\textsuperscript{217}

Some businesses conceded in hiring blacks. Metropolitan Life Insurance offered two separate policies for blacks and whites; however, it refused to employ blacks. Powell began a picketing campaign, and later Metropolitan Life relented. When Powell launched a picketing campaign against Con Edison, Harlemites turned their lights off on specific nights and used candles. He recommended that the electric bill be paid in pennies to disrupt business. In April 1938, Con Ed submitted to hiring black employees.\textsuperscript{218} In the case of the telephone company, the Coordinating Committee encouraged Harlemites to stop dialing numbers when making a call and instead, ask the


\textsuperscript{217} Powell, Jr., \textit{Adam by Adam}, 65-66.

\textsuperscript{218} Haygood, 77.
operator to place the call.219

In August, 1938, New York's black newspapers reported that an agreement was reached between Powell's Greater New York Coordinating Committee for Employment and the Uptown Chamber of Commerce, which advocated for the employment of more blacks in white collar jobs in white-owned establishments in Harlem.220 The agreement resulted from the 1938 United States Supreme Court's decision upholding the right of groups to picket against racial discrimination practiced by establishments. In 1938, Powell spoke against intraracial prejudice at Shaw University's commencement ceremony, where an honorary doctorate of divinity was conferred upon him. He stated, "We've got to streamline our race and come to realize that mass action is the most powerful force on earth."221

In the late 1930s, Abyssinians began paying attention to issues related to World War II. During the 1930s, the congregation gained awareness of various international crises. Spain experienced a civil war in the mid-1930s, and Italy invaded Ethiopia as well as the African Abyssinia in 1935. In January 1936, Powell preached to his congregation: "It is imperative that the twelve million Negroes of America and the


hundreds of millions of the darker people on the earth realize that Nazism is deeply committed to persecuting the blacks of this world.”

In 1938, under the spiritual leadership of Powell, Abyssinian donated $130 to the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the American Committee for Christian German refugees to assist the European, oppressed minorities. Powell wanted to illustrate to the world that Abyssinians demonstrated the Christian message of love and responsibility for one’s neighbor was genuine. Powell professed: “I personally feel that it is significant when the Negro people, as poverty-stricken and oppressed as they are, are yet willing to gladly make this contribution.”

In 1939, the committee asked Grover Whalen, Chairman of the New York World’s Fair Corporation, to employ qualified blacks. Greater New York World’s Fair’s slogan was “Building the World of Tomorrow,” and Powell told Grover Whalen, “You cannot have a World of Tomorrow from which you have excluded colored people.” In 1939, Powell led the GNYCC in picketing the fair. The fair officials hired more blacks

---


225 Powell, Jr., Adam by Adam, 66.
but only in menial positions. Powell admonished his followers not to let up. Consequently, his Sunday sermons were calls to action. Powell changed his strategy and instituted a selective boycott. Powell was the boisterous agitator, who could galvanize the masses. The NAACP were quiet negotiators but benefitted from Powell’s threats.\footnote{Hamilton, \textit{Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography}, 99-100.}

During the World’s Fair episode, he met Trinidad-born jazz pianist, Hazel Scott, who was famous in the New York supper clubs. Powell welcomed her assistance when she joined the picket lines. Over time, they became better acquainted, and consequently, Powell’s marriage to Isabel was in jeopardy.\footnote{Ibid., 107.} Hazel once said, “The first time I heard Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., exhorted a crowd I tingled from head to toe and realized that I was in the presence of greatness. But it really started to happen for me when I heard him speak and saw the brilliance, the soul of the man.”\footnote{\textit{Hazel Scott Personal Papers}, quoted in Karen Chilton, \textit{Hazel Scott: The Pioneering Journey of a Jazz Pianist from Café Society to Hollywood to HUAC} (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 98.}

Another example of Powell’s social activism featured him boycotting the Standard Brands Company as a result of an Abyssinian member who worked at the company and complained about the segregated toilet facilities for its employees. Powell collaborated with the NAACP to pressure the company to change its segregation practice and to rehire some of the black employees who were fired.\footnote{Ibid.} Because of his activism,
Powell earned the nickname “Fighting Adam.” Moderate civil rights advocates called on Powell frequently to achieve certain civil rights goals.

By 1941, Powell became one of the most influential leaders in Harlem. He gained influence as a pastor with a strong influential base and with his weekly column in Harlem’s newspaper, the *Amsterdam News*, in which he wrote about the plight of blacks. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Powell’s stature increased, and in Harlem, his civil rights victories made him a hero among blacks and white liberals. Powell was a man who took action, spoke of unity, and ultimately, made great strides. Minority groups found that demonstrations and economic pressure was effective, and Powell was their chosen leader. Needless to say, the impetus behind Powell’s activism was the Abyssinian Baptist Church.

In 1941, the Omnibus Corporation presented issues of employment discrimination against blacks. The companies refused to employ them as mechanics and drivers. Powell and the GYNCC decided to accept the challenge of fighting the discrimination tactics of the bus company. They formed a coalition with the GNYCC, the Communist-influenced National Negro Congress, and the nationalist-oriented Harlem Labor Union, calling themselves the United Negro Bus Strike Committee (UNBSC). Consequently, the

---


232 Haskins, 43.


committee urged Harlemites to boycott the bus companies. Powell and his colleagues presented an agreement to the bus company, to the Transport Workers Union, and to Harrison Jackson who represented Harlem’s consumers. The agreement stated that “for every white man employed, two Negroes should be employed.”²³⁵ Since the time of the agreement, an enormous amount blacks were employed in the New York City transit system in various positions.²³⁶

In the winter of 1941, Powell persuaded the Interboro News Company to employ eight blacks operators at local newsstands in Harlem. Other companies soon followed suit, such as the Silvercup Bread Company, at Macy’s and Gimbels.²³⁷ Powell and the GNYCC hosted meetings to protest against violence against black residents in upper Harlem and Washington Heights by whites. Accordingly, he demanded meetings with the mayor and held protest planning meetings at the church.²³⁸

With the support of Abyssinian and enviable record in civil rights, Powell decided to pursue a career in politics.²³⁹ By 1941, he focused his attention to city council politics and was contemplating about ending his marriage with Isabel.²⁴⁰ Powell encouraged the

²³⁵ Powell, Jr., Adam by Adam, 67.

²³⁶ Ibid.


²³⁹ Chapman and Chapman, 66.

Coordinating Committee for Employment to turn its attention to political equality. The committee's name changed to the Peoples' Committee with a slogan of "One People, One Fight, One Victory." \(^\text{241}\)

**Political Activism of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.**

Powell announced his candidacy for the New York City Council in September 25, 1941. Powell was a registered Democrat, but he decided to run as an independent. \(^\text{242}\) He was a contemporary exemplar of a preacher-politician using his church as his foundation for political operation and using it to launch his political career. \(^\text{243}\) The church as an indigenous organization provided the leadership base, social interaction, and communication networks required for collective action. \(^\text{244}\) His campaign was based on the people's platform. He pursued racial solidarity and was considered a symbol of "the new Negro, the Negro who does no bend his knees, hang his head and carry his hat; but the Negro who is now standing up." \(^\text{245}\) Powell was asked by a reporter what he would do as a member of the city council, Powell replied: "I intend to fight discrimination in city

\(^{241}\) Powell, Jr., *Adam by Adam*, 68.

\(^{242}\) Ibid.


contracts and franchises. I mean in the giving of contracts to firms that won’t employ colored persons; discrimination in the police department, in the public schools and the city colleges and in Harlem itself.”

Under the proportional representation system, Powell required a majority of black and white votes to win. Powell provided leadership, and the Abyssinian Baptist Church supplied the necessary resources for a political victory, especially during a period when blacks had limited access to party mechanisms. Powell’s victory illustrated “independent, anti-machine coalition politics of resentment and reform.”

Believing that only an independent could be trusted by the masses, Powell wore no party label: “I always liked the guy who was nationally a Democrat, locally a Republican, theoretically a Socialist, but practically a Communist.”

Powell promoted a “swing vote” strategy, which allowed him to support the most qualified candidates, endorsing the best-qualified candidates, and not basing his decision solely on their party affiliations. He believed that this strategy would promote


accountability among candidates, make parties less conservative, and allow voters more influence. Powell's political philosophy was highly influenced by the Communist Party and its Popular Front. He attracted coalitions of all democratic forces, which included blacks and whites. His volunteers were given the name "The People's Committee," and his campaign was known as "a people's crusade." Ultimately, his election was called "a victory of the people."251

Although he opposed separatism, he embraced blackness and intertwined his integrationist philosophy with the realities of Harlem.252 Powell was described as being "a rabble-rouser," "an irritant," and "a militant."253 In his political career, Powell introduced many changes that enhanced his position in the Harlem community, "which became for him a microcosm of black America."254 With the support of his community, Powell depended on Harlem's vote in the congressional race. Knowingly, Powell rarely campaigned. He was an icon among Harlemites because he was able to relate to their

---


254 Ibid.
oppression. For Powell, Harlem represented a haven for blacks, which offered black culture and black leadership.

After a vigorous campaign, he became the first black City Councilman in New York City. He was determined to bring social change to New York. With members of the City Council, he was able to get the mayor to eliminate the six-day work week for city workers. Another accomplishment as a city councilmember is that he conducted an investigation of the city colleges to inquire why more blacks were not on the college faculty. The outcome of the investigation led to the city colleges hiring more blacks.255

Effectively, Powell combined protest and elections politics in Harlem as part of his operation.256 In a leadership role, Powell considered it his responsibility to interpret the connections that bound race, religion, and politics.257 Being considered a militant, Powell fought for black equality with the support of his power base in Harlem.258 In his aldermanic race, Powell received votes from members of both parties. When Powell ran on the Republican ticket, clearly, he took advantage of the ticket and not vice versa.259

Newly elected as a councilman, Powell began his fight for the welfare of black

---


256 Hamilton, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political, 114.

257 McNeil et. al., Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith, 177.


Harlemites. He planned a mass picketing of the New York Telephone Company to demand employment for blacks. He argued that the economic situation in Harlem and discrimination against blacks was the primary reason for the “Harlem crime wave.”

In February 1942, along with Harlem businessman, Charles Buchanan, Powell founded the newspaper, *The People’s Voice*, which highlighted Powell’s activities and his speeches. The paper served as a vehicle to help Powell gain local and national exposure. Serving as a councilmember, he criticized the federal government for its treatment towards the Japanese American and its treatment of blacks in the armed services. He opposed the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, rationalizing that they were imprisoned based on their skin color, since German-Americans and Italian-Americans did not experience such treatment. Overall, he was distressed by color discrimination wherever it appeared. He introduced resolutions that abolished media designation of an individual’s race who were accused of crimes and demanded Harlem’s streets be renamed for historical blacks. Certainly, Powell was made significant achievements as a city councilman and continuously accepted new challenges.

---


262 Coleman, 53.

263 Christopher, 197.

Powell participated in mass rallies that promoted the war effort and shared the platform with Eleanor Roosevelt, movie stars, and entertainers such as George Jessel, Danny Kaye, Sophie Tucker, Paul Robeson, Helen Hayes, and Burgess Meredith. In the “Salute to Negro Troops” event, he condemned segregation in the armed forces. He was in opposition to black separatism and anti-Semitism and worked “to smash Hitlerism, both domestic and foreign.” Although he opposed separatism, he clearly championed blackness. Powell was committed first to blacks because they were the foundation of his coalition as well as his power source.

In 1942, Powell wrote an article titled “Is This a White Man’s War?” which appeared in the Common Sense magazine. Powell expressed that “the thinking Negro knows that if America loses the war, his plight as a Negro will be much worse than it is now. Under democracy, however, poorly realized the Negro does have a fighting chance.” Powell demanded the eradication of “Hitlerism” in the armed forces and defense industries. In addition, he warned blacks to beware of “crackpots and self-styled nationalistic leaders” who might dissuade the country against democracy. He believed

---


267 Ibid.


269 Ibid.
that England should abandon its “White Man’s Burden”\textsuperscript{270} colonial policy, and the United States should denounce racial discrimination. Additionally, the democracies were obligated to ensure freedom and representation at the peace table for countries such as Palestine, India, Arabia, and China.\textsuperscript{271}

Starting in 1942, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) placed Powell under surveillance and continued for the next twenty-eight years. After several months, the FBI in New York submitted a report on Powell and noted that his “nationalistic tendencies” were “communistic,” that he “has also been active as member of and speaker before many of the alleged Communist front organizations.”\textsuperscript{272} Isabel admitted that Powell invited Communists to some political rallies. They supported the racial dilemma of blacks and other oppressed individuals. She confessed that Powell was not a Communist but a politician. He worked with Communists because he believed that such coalitions would assist in achieving real freedom for blacks and other oppressed groups.\textsuperscript{273} As articulated in black theology, Powell used his ministry to address the needs of an oppressed community. His theology centered on Jesus Christ, which was a component of black theology.\textsuperscript{274} Powell praised the Communist Party: “It is time that the Negroes participated in the political scene as members of the democracy, not just as

\textsuperscript{270} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{271} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{272} Hamilton, \textit{Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography}, 175.

\textsuperscript{273} Washington Powell and Burnett, \textit{Adam’s Belle}, 121.

\textsuperscript{274} Cone, \textit{A Black Theology of Liberation}, 5.
Negroes. This is the one reason I have always given credit to the Communist Party, because they have the courage to run Negro people in national, state and country elections.”275

Powell was “the epitome of the black political figure in a state of constant moral outrage over America’s dilemma.”276 He viewed World War II as the opportunity to expose the “contradictions of the domestic dilemma, to push the campaign for a “double victory.” 277 To him, there was nothing to debate about whether and when segregation should be ended.278

During World War II, Powell was involved in “Civil War II.” He protested against segregation in the armed forces, discrimination against blacks in defense plants, and presented the issue of blacks fighting for democracy abroad to protect the domestic “color-caste system.” Furthermore, Powell’s column in the Amsterdam News provided a forum to discuss the injustices against blacks in relation to such current issues as integrating the military.279

In an address at the Metropolitan Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., Powell declared that the balance of power in the 1944 presidential election would be affected by


277 Ibid.

278 Ibid.

the black vote. He proclaimed that "in many states, the Republican and Democratic
machines are so close in strength that the Negro has in his hands the election of the next
President."\textsuperscript{280} In his congressional candidacy, Powell's platform focused on the
following: demanding a permanent fair employment practices commission, abolishing
segregation in the armed serves, ending the poll tax, and eradicating discrimination in
interstate travel.\textsuperscript{281}

In the spirit of liberation, Langston Hughes wrote Powell's a campaign song, "Let
My People Go – Now." Powell received votes from the political canvassing of Benjamin
Davis in getting votes from Harlem's Communists and an endorsement by the Labor
Party. He also received an endorsement from his nemesis, Tammany Hall.\textsuperscript{282} He
campaigned by writing columns in the "Soap Box" and in \textit{The People's Voice}, which
featured issues on labor unions, civil rights, the war overseas, and his anti-segregation
positions. On the speaking circuit, Powell maintained a heavy schedule across the
country and accepted invitations to preach as well as to speak at NAACP meetings where
he was introduced "as the inevitable next black congressman."\textsuperscript{283}

On the night of the election, he told reporters at Abyssinian that he would

\textsuperscript{280} "Calls Negro Vote Balance of Power in 1944 Election," \textit{The Chicago Defender (National
search.proquest.com/docview/492641317?accountid=8422.

\textsuperscript{281} McNeil et. al., \textit{Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith}, 189.

\textsuperscript{282} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{283} Hamilton, \textit{Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography}, 148-149.
continue his pastorate and commitment to his church.\textsuperscript{284} After his nomination, Powell declared that “there will never be any real victory nor lasting peace until the rights of Negro men are recognized on an equal basis along with the rights of all men.”\textsuperscript{285} He was victorious over his opponent, Mrs. Sarah Speaks. In 1944, he was seated in Congress under the administration of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Vice-President Harry S. Truman.\textsuperscript{286}

By the last quarter of 1944, the pastor and the Abyssinian congregation began to address postwar concerns. In a sermon entitled, “The Postwar World for God,” Powell quoted the second verse of the sixty-first Psalm, “From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: to lead me to the rock that is higher than I.”\textsuperscript{287} He preached that “we must build some sort of world organization to: protect the weak from the strong, lead subject people to freedom, find homes for the homeless, provide food for

\begin{footnotes}
\end{footnotes}
the hungry, guarantee individual rights, intellectual and spiritual liberty. 288 Powell reminded Abyssinians that real transformation was the result of both faith and work. 289

Washington, D.C., was a segregated city in 1945. Powell discovered that black congressmen had to comply with a great deal of unofficial rules, such as not being able to use the congressional dining room, gymnasium, barbershop. Moreover, they were prohibited to extend an invitation to black journalists to sit in the congressional galleries. Before Powell, black congressmen, including William L. Dawson, adhered to these rules, but Powell was determined not to abide by them. Immediately, he addressed the issue of this unofficial discrimination. 290

In 1945, Harry Truman began his presidency. As time passed, Truman and Powell never developed a congenial relationship. From the beginning, Truman did not advocate “social equality.” 291 In January 1945, Congressman Powell was appointed to the House Education and Labor Committee. He reprimanded the military for not accepting Negro nurses, proposed legislation to abolish segregation on railways, and demanded that Negro journalists be permitted to sit in the congressional press galleries. 292 He worked with the NAACP in sponsoring the Taft-Hartley Law amendment that

288 Ibid.
289 Ibid.
290 Haskins, 53.
mandated “that no union be certified as the bargaining agent if it discriminated on the basis of race, religion, or national origin.”

In 1945, at the NAACP’s request, Powell presented a bill that outlawed segregation in interstate travel in 15 southern states. He indicated that the bill would prohibit the separation of black and white passengers on trains and in stations during interstate travel. This bill would supersede any state law that required separate waiting rooms, restaurants and other facilities. He stated that “this law is especially timely now because of the numbers of Negro servicemen traveling in the country.” He declared, “The passage of an anti-Jim Crow transportation act will be a blow against Hitler just as will the fall of Berlin. It will let the Negro GIs know that they are fighting a people’s war. It will reassure the white GIs that their fellow Negro fighters, good enough to die in Europe and the Pacific, are good enough to ride anywhere in the United States of America.” Mary McLeod Bethune, President of the National Council of Negro Women, applauded this bill. She admitted, “It is a constructive bill for general thinking, and represents a problem with which people in the states will have to reckon. As Negroes gain in their appreciation of the franchise, and begin to use the ballot in the South, their strength is going to be felt in this and other problems which confront


295 Ibid.
them."²⁹⁶ She also stated that "the South cannot forever keep up this discrimination that they cannot explain and for which they cannot give a reason."²⁹⁷

One of his first speeches on the House floor attacked the quota system in New York dental schools as it pertained to Jews. Frequently, he utilized his congressional forum to address the position of racial equality.²⁹⁸ One of the bills that he introduced was to establish a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC). Soon after, Powell introduced the following bills: the anti-lynching measure, a bill extending suffrage to the citizens of the District of Columbia, a bill allowing native-born Filipinos and those serving in the United States armed forces to be naturalized, a bill granting naturalization to individuals from India and one giving natives of the Virgin Islands the right to vote. He also worked on an amendment to the Hatch Act, which exempted federal civil service employees from its provisions. Moreover, he was determined to attack segregation and Jim Crow on common interstate commerce carriers.²⁹⁹

When Powell was identifying black candidates to integrate the United States Naval Academy, he offered Wesley Brown a nomination. In 1945, Powell nominated 10 candidates for the Naval Academy, but Brown was the only candidate that met the academic requirements. In June 1945, Brown was accepted to the academy. During

²⁹⁶ Ibid.
²⁹⁷ Ibid.
Brown's first year, Powell sent a letter to Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal accusing the academy's faculty and students of forcing Brown out of the academy. In the letter, Powell charged that some faculty members participated in "undergrading" Brown. Powell leaked the letter to The Washington Post, but later, he confessed that he fabricated the grading charges to protect Brown. After the publication of Powell's letter, the navy brass pressured the United States Naval Academy administrators to stop harassing Brown on campus. In June 1949, Brown became the first black American to graduate from the United States Naval Academy.

In his efforts in demanding equality for black troops, he circulated a petition, which was signed by civic and political leaders. His intent was to bring awareness of this issue to President Truman and War Secretary Stimson to support an integrated combat unit policy. He received an endorsement from Representatives Hugh De Lacy, Helen Gahagan Douglas, Thomas S. Gordon, and William T. Granahan to propose equality for black troops.

In his personal life, Powell divorced his first wife, Isabel Washington. On
August 1, 1945, Powell and Hazel Scott were married at Bethel AME Church in Stamford, Connecticut. They shared a sense of political awareness, especially a commitment to civil rights. In a feature of Ebony (titled “Hazel’s Heart Belongs to Daddy”), Hazel stated publicly, “We could do great things for our people together.” In October 1945, Hazel announced that she was pregnant, and Adam Clayton Powell, III was born on June 17, 1946.

Civil rights leaders were aware of Truman’s position, and they intensively kept the pressure on him. A. Philip Randolph organized a small delegation in August 1945, two weeks after the victory over Japan, to meet with the President. This meeting with the President never occurred. Truman was not willing at that time to receive the delegation. Instead, the President continued to voice his support for a permanent FEPC, but he did not urge Congress to take action. Accordingly, he advocated for additional funds for the existing FEPC created by Roosevelt in 1941. By February 1945, FBI reports were labeling Powell’s The People’s Voice, a “Negro Communist newspaper,” and continued to concentrate on Powell’s senior position with the paper. In December 1946, Powell severed his ties with The People’s Voice. Any black leader was probably a target for FBI investigations.

304 Chilton, 107


306 Haskins, 82.

investigation, particularly one that was outspoken and a Communist sympathizer. In the meantime, during his first year in office into 1946, he focused on the economic issues of peacetime conversion and planned to maneuver around the politically divisive issue of civil rights.\textsuperscript{308}

The Congressional Irritant

Powell assumed a new, prominent role in the struggle for civil rights and became the quintessential irritant within Congress. After Powell insulted Bess Truman for not declining the luncheon invitation with the Daughters of the American Revolution, for the duration of Truman’s presidency, Truman never invited Powell to the White House or to receptions held for members of Congress and their spouses. Because of the contention that existed, the Truman White House channeled all patronage jobs for Harlem through the office of Chicago Congressman William L. Dawson.\textsuperscript{309} In addition, Scott challenged racist attitudes by refusing to entertain for segregated audiences in the South.\textsuperscript{310}

Consequently, Powell introduced the Powell Amendment, which prevented federal funds to those who sought to preserve segregation. The first experiment was with the school lunch program. Under legislation passed by Congress, free school lunches were available to schoolchildren. With the support of his colleagues, the first civil rights

\textsuperscript{308} Ibid., 182.

\textsuperscript{309} Ibid., 165, 175.

amendment, Public Law 396, attached to the school lunch program, was passed and enacted by the 79th Congress on June 4, 1946.311

The Powell Amendment gained support from two alliances: congressmen who strongly supported civil rights measures, and congressmen who disagreed with general aid, believing that a civil rights amendment was a mechanism for sealing such a bill’s legislative fate. By voting in favor of the Powell Amendment, mainly conservative northern Republicans appeared as supporting civil rights but kept in mind the dangers of “creeping, socialism” and “big” government.312 After a Powell Amendment was adopted, a school aid bill would eventually fail. Southern congressmen would most certainly vote negatively in prohibiting federal funds to segregated school systems.313

Powell introduced a bill, H.R. 2708, which prohibited segregation in the armed forces. He also condemned the discriminatory treatment of Japanese Americans. He denounced American’s silence on the Holocaust. He confronted the State Department’s decision to maintain Japanese government control over a liberated Korea. In introducing (H.R. 1901), this bill was intended to authorize the naturalization and entrance of Koreans into the United States. He criticized Britain’s policies toward Hong Kong, and its continuous hegemony over that territory. Powell became known as “Mr. Civil Rights” in the Congress and the country. In 1946, he made significant strides in the area of fair

311 Powell, Jr., Adam by Adam, 82.


313 Ibid.
employment practices.314

On Sunday mornings, he delivered sermons to the Abyssinian congregants, “which became a mixture of biblical test, political commentary, and reports from Congress.”315 His basic message resonated “challenging the society to overcome the American Dilemma, to bring its practices into line with its creed.”316 He projected himself as “that dynamic, militant advocate of civil rights, racial justice, and economic advancement for the little people.”317 Throughout his career, Powell infused black theology into militant activism in fighting for the oppressed. During his first fifteen years in Congress, his reputation as “Mr. Civil Rights” originated from championing of the liberal, civil rights causes and introducing the very controversial “Powell Amendment.”318

During the 1940s, A. Philip Randolph continued his fight for a FEPC and maintained his position as a leader in the labor movement and in civil rights. Mary McLeod Bethune was still an activist in civil rights well into the early fifties. Paul Robeson and W. E. B. Du Bois were strong activists of civil rights for blacks. Successfully, the NAACP challenged the courts to overturn segregation in the schools, against restrictive covenants in real estate contracts, and in voting discrimination cases.

314 Powell, Jr., Adam by Adam, 80.
316 Ibid.
317 Ibid.
318 Ibid.
Later, new leaders, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., emerged on the civil rights scene. In January 1947, Powell introduced a bill to allow citizens of Washington, D.C. the right to vote, and he began his campaign to permit black reporters access to the House Gallery. In Panama in 1949, Powell addressed the Panamanian National Assembly regarding the construction of the canal and especially about the working conditions of the workers. This subject was segued into a discussion on the failed race relations in the United States. Powell issued the following statement:

We are living today in one world. Whether we be Jew or Gentile, Protestant or Catholic, black or white, Americans or Panamanians, we are all equals in today’s society. Unfortunately, there are some people of my nation who are ignorant. They think that they are better than anyone else. I wish to assure you that those people do not represent the majority thinking of the American public.

Between 1949 and 1952, Powell spoke out against the House Un-American Activities Committee because of a refusal to investigate the Klu Klux Klan. He made accusations against the Federal Housing Administration of discriminating against blacks and asked for the eradication of the poll tax as well as integration in the armed services. Over the next several years, Powell and the NAACP had a cooperative relationship that was more cooperative than antagonistic. The NAACP decided to include Powell in a

---

319 Ibid., 188.
320 Haskins, 61.
major civil rights conference planned for early 1950. Contemporaneously, the Cold War and charges of Communist infiltration in the United States were prevalent in the United States.\textsuperscript{322} The conference’s goal was to demonstrate to Congress the political support for FEPC and other civil rights measures. The aim of the conference was to pressure Congress to pass civil rights legislation and to get the president to cosign in this effort. The organizers concluded that Congress, not the President, was the problem.\textsuperscript{323}

In early 1950, Truman believed that an FEPC bill could possibly pass in Congress. Led by Powell, Democrats presented the bill to the House. Powell urged Congress “to give dignity to itself by keeping the measure alive,” but southern Democrats as well as conservative Republicans defeated the bill.\textsuperscript{324} In 1950, the United States entered the Korean War, and at the same time, Truman was also confronted with the threat of communism in the United States government. The McCarran Act passed in Congress, which prohibited travel by Americans who were considered to be subversive. The passport of entertainer and activist, Paul Robeson, was confiscated; moreover, scholar and civil rights activist, W.E.B. Du Bois was arrested for distributing peace petitions. Under J. Edgar Hoover’s leadership, the FBI infiltrated organizations by conducting a witch hunt to identify subversives.\textsuperscript{325}


\textsuperscript{323} Hamilton, \textit{Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography}, 189-191.

\textsuperscript{324} Haygood, 160.

\textsuperscript{325} Ibid., 160.
On November 5, 1950, Powell delivered a radio broadcast on station WMCA. In the broadcast, he stated that he rose to the number two ranking member on the Committee on Education and Labor. He was the chairman of the Congressional Subcommittee on FEPC and the author as well as co-author of all the civil rights bills that were introduced in the United States Congress. He wrote the only civil rights law that was passed since the Civil War, Public Law 396, Section LLC.326

During his first fifteen years in Congress, Powell’s reputation as “Mr. Civil Rights” emerged essentially from two sources: his vigilant championing of civil rights and his visibility as a congressional member; and the very controversial “Powell Amendment.”327 During the Eighty-first Congress, Powell served on the House Committee on Education and Labor with John F. Kennedy from Massachusetts and Richard M. Nixon from California. He collaborated with the NAACP in sponsoring an amendment to the Taft-Hartley Law that mandated that a union could not be certified as the bargaining agent if it practiced segregation or discrimination on the basis of race, religion, or national origin. Over the next few years, the NAACP and Powell collaborated on a few civil rights initiatives.328

In November 1952, Dwight David Eisenhower won the Democratic nomination for the Presidency of the United States. During his first term, Eisenhower gave forty-seven blacks appointed positions, eliminated segregation in Veterans Administration

326 Congressional Letter with attachment “Radio Broadcast of Representative Adam C. Powell, Station WMCA” November 5, 1950, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.

327 Hamilton, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography, 187-188.

328 Ibid., 188-189.
hospitals, integrated southern naval bases and installations. Early in Eisenhower's presidency, Washington, D.C. was desegregated, which was largely due to Powell's advocacy. In 1954, another landmark event that occurred during the early years of Eisenhower's Administration was the decision in Brown v. Board of Education, which the Supreme Court decision declared "separate but equal" schools unconstitutional. This ruling marked the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. With the emergence of new black leaders, notably Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Powell was not the only black leader advocating for the rights of black Americans.329

Powell became a participant in United States foreign policy and a proponent of international human rights. Consequently, he became a spokesperson for equality for the people of color all over the world.330 In the foreign service, evidence suggested that the federal government practiced racism due to the lack of African-American personnel working in United States embassies.331 In 1953, Powell pressured President Eisenhower and the State Department to employ more blacks in the foreign service. On June 10, 1953, Powell communicated to Eisenhower that "discrimination in the Department of State which now allows only fifty Negroes in the foreign service out of six thousand employed" should immediately abolish its segregationist policies.332

329 Haskins, 74-75.


During the 1950s, Powell participated in the World Conference of Parliamentarians on World Government in London and in Copenhagen. While attending the conference, he was able to visit most of Europe, North Africa, the Near East, the Caribbean, and Central America. On February 24, 1954, Powell delivered a testimony before the senate sub-committee on the Fair Employment Practices bill. He stated before the committee that he authored many single civil rights bills in the House of Representative, which was introduced during the past ten years that he was a member of the United States Congress. Consequently, from his work in congress, Powell believed that a democratic government was the best political system.333 The following testimony echoed Powell’s belief in true democracy. Emphatically, he criticized the United States’ hypocritical stance that democracy should be practiced worldwide, but in essence, it failed to practice what it was preaching.

The passage of this bill will be much more important in the eyes of the world than a military victory. It would dictate a permanent victor for a real democracy. America is being judged today by the peoples of the earth on the basis of its attitude towards its minorities. We cannot continue very much longer as a first class power as long as any portion of our citizenry is of second class citizens. We cannot have a successful foreign policy as long as it is backed at home by a bipartisan Jim Crow policy. Nothing would please the Kremlin more than the defeat of this legislation. FEPC did work during wartime and is working now...Mark you, my legislation to abolish segregation in the Armed Services and to abolish discrimination in employment were both introduced at the same time...We have tried to get the free world to follow our standards of democracy when the free world knows that our standards are only lip-service. While it is true that we have made some progress in extending the democratic principles to various minority groups, yet our progress has lamentably been behind the times. We are conducting a twentieth century campaign for freedom with the nineteenth century civil rights background...Civil rights legislation must be lifted out of the

level of politics into the realm of statesmanship... The minorities in our country are revolting against the past attitude of lip service politicians promising civil rights but failing to do a single thing about enacting them into law when they are elected. Italy stands today but 5% of the electorate away from the Communist government. France is almost in the same condition. Let the people of these countries and others, especially in the Far East know that we Americans are not double talking, twofaced hypocrites. Let them know that we are practicing here what we are preaching abroad and the masses of people who are definitely going toward the Kremlin in Europe and Asia will turn to Washington for leadership. Put American citizens, irrespective of color, race or national origin, into our embassies and consulates and they will be a living symbol of democracy at work.334

In a letter written on August 5, 1954, Powell confronted President Eisenhower on the morale of black GIs in Europe. He traveled to military installations of the United States Armed Forces in France, Germany and North Africa. He received letters of criticism about the race relations in the military. In his letter, he stated:

I am interested in the Negro-white relationships and the Negro-white-civilian relationships. My major fight in the U.S. Congress for ten years has been the integration of black and white troops in the Armed Services. In two years, I have received more complaints from Negro GIs stationed at Chateauroux from GIs at all other installations. I found out that at Chateauroux there is now being practiced by the French civilian population an anti-Negro policy in all of the public places. This is shocking. This anti-Negro policy is due to the worst elements of our American way of life in that community. The attitude has been forced on the civilian population through economic pressure by these GIs. The attitude of the French civilians is distinctly not anti-colored but it is anti-Negro. It is a studied program forced on French civilians by the worst elements of the white GIs. I believe that integration must now go into its second stage. Negro's must be promoted to non-commissioned officers. At Chateauroux, two have been promoted in three years. At Orleans, there are 500 officers, and there is only one Negro - Army Lieutenant Colonel. I believe that at Chateauroux the commanding officers should declare off limits any establishments that practice racial discrimination. French civilians have been pressured into practicing

334 Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Testimony before the Senate Sub-committee on Fair Employment Practices Bill, February 24, 1954, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.
discrimination. The French civilians would welcome some kind of law to revoke the license of any establishment that practices racial discrimination.335

Like his father, Powell fought to find a solution to integrate the armed forces. He was astonished to learn that black GIs while serving their country was being discriminated in European countries. Initially, the impetus behind this racism was introduced by white GIs who influenced Europeans to discriminate against black GIs. Other civil rights leaders voiced similar concerns. Walter White, NAACP executive secretary, thought “it was ‘perilous’ to transport American racism overseas during the war.”336

Powell continued his fight for equality for black Americans who served in the armed forces. Powell delivered the following remarks on Lincoln’s birthday, February 12th on National Broadcasting Company’s WRCA-TV on the program called “Man of the Week.”

Eisenhower’s program of integration in the Armed Forces is in serious trouble based upon my personal observations as I toured the army and air force bases of Europe and confidential information just furnished me by the Department of Defense. Negro men now serving in the defense establishments of our nation are deliberately prevented from advancing and, in the case of the navy, are being discouraged from enlisting and re-enlisting. Powell attained data regarding army re-enlisted for the first nine months in 1954. He asserted that “this is definitely not integration when the number of officers in the United States Navy is 1/10 of 1% and the number officers in the Marine Corps is 1/10 of 1%, also.” In another claim, Powell stated that “another alarming fact that I can now release – which is the results of my studies in Europe – is that Negro civilians are definitely being discriminated against by the Pentagon. On the entire staff the army schools in Europe, with over 1,250 civilians assigned, only 12 are Negroes. The same situation is true with our Special Services. The Special Services of Europe are in

335 Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Letter to President Eisenhower on Moral of Negro GIs in Europe, August 5, 1954, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.

336 Dudziak, 83.
the command of the highest ranking Negro woman in the WACs, Lieutenant Colonel Bernice Hughes. She told me, personally, that under her entire command, she has only one Negro serving. He asserted that "the President of the United States must immediately step into this picture and order the Pentagon to hire Negro civilian workers above the Grade 6 level and see that Negro men are trained as officers. Where there is ample opportunity for training and no discrimination can be practiced, such as in the non-commissioned officers schools, negro men are advancing into private first class, corporal and sergeant brackets on a much larger percentage than whites but as soon as they get to the place where their promotions depend upon opinion and not objective testing, then immediately they are stymied." \(^{337}\)

In his remarks above, Powell spoke on behalf of the oppressed from a black theological perspective. He attacked discrimination in the armed forces and supported his argument with facts based on the current state of blacks in the armed forces.

In 1955, the NAACP recommended that a "Powell Amendment" would be more logical in supporting the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in racially segregated schools that violated the Fourteenth Amendment's provision.\(^{338}\) The NAACP mounted an extensive lobbying campaign in support of the Powell amendment. He proposed that the provision be applied only to those school districts that refused to desegregate, and he offered to give such school districts four years to begin the process.\(^{339}\)

In several speeches delivered on the House floor, Powell's reputation grew as being a proponent of anti-segregation amendment. Having the support of the NAACP, Powell fought on dismissing the charge that his amendment was too radical.

\(^{337}\) Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., "Remarks by Representative on Eisenhower's Program of Integration in the Armed Forces in Serious Danger," February 12, 1955, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.


\(^{339}\) Ibid.
Congressman Stewart L. Udall recommended the elimination of the Powell Amendment and replace it a provision that would provide additional funding to school districts that were affected by the court ruling of dismantling the dual school system. He believed that this method would provide southerners an incentive to desegregate. The NAACP understood the rationale behind his move and would not oppose extra funds to assist the desegregation process. Eventually, the school construction aid bill suffered defeat. The Powell Amendment raised a rather problematic issue that would be resolved by the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Some critics believed that this issue introduced by Powell contributed to the legacy of his congressional career.340

In his political affiliations, Powell was not threatened by his associations with Communist sympathizers. Powell adopted the "good Democrat" role in an effort to survive the Red Scare.341 Accordingly, Powell decided to become somewhat of a conventional politician to protect his political career. Unfortunately, Hazel's name appeared on a list of Communist sympathizers who were affiliated with the entertainment industry and to Barney Josephson, owner of Café Society. On September 22, 1950, Hazel appeared before Congressman John S. Wood and the other McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) members. In her statement, she explained that she condemned Red Channels and Counterattack by challenging their methods, their listings, and their existence. She stated that most of the listings associated with her name

340 Ibid., 233-235.

341 Haygood, 161-162.
were erroneous. She explained that performers were generally unaware of the organizations’ political affiliations who hired them. Hazel’s statement was recorded with the HUAC, but it only resulted in a negative outcome. Her name appeared in the national press as “Hazel Scott Assails Listings of Artists as Red Supporters.” For the next several years, Hazel struggled to maintain her career.342

In 1953, Powell attended the World Association of Parliamentarians for World Government session in Copenhagen, Denmark. In his speech, he stated, “We have come here to see that this is not “the American Century,” and this is not the century of white supremacy.”343 He indicated that “a very tense situation is being created there (in West Germany), because of the shades of Nazism among the civilian population reinforced by the attitudes of the white GIs.”344 Powell wanted to resolve the issues of the United States low prestige abroad, the visibility of Nazism in Germany, the promotion of “a bipartisan foreign policy and complete elimination of McCarthy’s influence in the state department.”345 Powell proposed a call of action and recommended modeling the United Nations into “a positive organization of peoples for peace, rather a negative once of governments for defense.”346

342 Chilton, 145-150.

343 Abner W. Berry, “A Negro Congressman Looks at Our Allies,” Daily Worker, New York, October 8, 1953, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Archives and Manuscripts.

344 Ibid.

345 Ibid.

346 Ibid.
During the 1950s, Powell guided his congregation in adopting a global vision that focused on the Christian faith and freedom movements. Powell declared that “pride in an African heritage, support for Africans’ struggles for independence, and African Americans’ emphasis on civil rights litigation, and a movement for civil rights emerged as forces for change.” The Abyssinian experience was defined by the commitment to discipleship with a new direction in black history. Powell’s advocacy of civil rights and the preacher-politician’s activism allowed him to connect the injustice of American blacks with the global injustices of oppressed people of color, which became a prelude to the Black Power movement of the 1960s. From a global perspective, Abyssinians recognized that a connection existed between Africa and people of color. This recognition was illustrated by Haile Selassie’s visit at Abyssinian.

As an anti-colonial activist, Powell associated segregation and imperialism to the lack of “colored” representation in the United States as well as internationally. During the emperor’s tour of Harlem on May 30, 1954, Powell urged President Eisenhower to allow Haile Selassie to speak at the Abyssinian Baptist Church. Powell felt that “no important Negro should come to Harlem from any of the four corners of the earth without being honored at the Abyssinian Baptist Church.”

---

348 Ibid.
Powell’s request. In April 1954, Powell wrote to a White House advisor: “In May of this year, His Imperial Majesty, the Emperor of Ethiopia is visiting our country. In the course of his visit, I would like the State Department to arrange for him to either visit the Abyssinian Baptist Church or to arrange a motorcade through Harlem, which I will be glad to organize, and in the motorcade, have them briefly pause at the Abyssinian Baptist Church.” Emperor Haile Selassie’s visit was approved, and Selassie presented Powell with a gold medallion, which he wore frequently for the remainder of his life.

During Selassie’s visit at Abyssinian, Powell incited the audience with a captivating speech. He welcomed the emperor and associated the “prayers of Harlem” to the past, present, and future of Ethiopia. Powell applauded Ethiopia’s triumph in a Fascist environment. He declared that World War II could have been circumvented if there had been an intervention in Africa by the Western powers. He spoke to the emperor that “Harlem’s prayers were being offered for the day when the entire continent of Africa is free.” Selassie expressed his gratitude to Powell of the “thousands of dollars” and moral support sent by Harlemites to assist the Ethiopians in their time of need.

Selassie presented a solid gold Ethiopian cross to the church and decorated Powell with a

352 Ibid.
354 Ibid.
medal of honor. In his remarks, Powell stated, “we honor you because you are the symbol around which we place all our hopes, dreams and prayers that one day the entire continent of Africa shall be as free as the country of Ethiopia.” After Selassie’s visit, Powell frequently hosted leaders from Haiti, Liberia, Indonesia, Ghana, and Nigeria; however, mostly, he was inspired by Selassie’s visit to his church.

In 1955, the conference of the newly independent Asian and African nations in Bandung, Indonesia represented a defining moment for Powell. Prior to the Bandung Conference, he was a nationalist; after the conference, he became an internationalist. The United States strongly opposed participating in this conference, and when Powell decided to attend at his own expense, he was deterred from going. In 1955, against the objections of the state department, Powell, as an observer, attended the Bandung Conference. Powell believed that this “people’s revolution” should be “vitaly a part of the black revolution.” The Administration prohibited Powell from having any contact

355 Ibid.


358 Haskins, 75.

with the United States Embassy, the United States Ambassador, and all the United States employees in Indonesia.360

Before leaving for Bandung, Indonesia on March 29, 1955, Powell addressed Congress and explained that a member of the United States government should attend the conference to display the country’s sympathy for the objective of peace for the nations attending the conference.361 In a statement on March 31, 1955, Powell indicated the following:

On April 18, 1955 in Bandung, Indonesia representatives of three-fifths of the world’s population will gather together the first world conference of free nations representing the colored peoples of Asia and of Africa. The United States naturally has not been invited. This is an Asian-African conference. But I believe that someone from the United States should be at that conference, unofficially, of course, but nevertheless as a person of good will...The Department of State did not agree with my proposal. I am going to this conference, at my own expense, entirely unofficially. I hope that my presence there as an American and above all as a member of the colored peoples of the United States will be of some value for the peace, understanding and strengthening of brotherhood of our world. The conference at Bandung, which is now officially called the Asian-African Conference instead of the Afro-Asian Conference will tackle many problems of a comprehensive nature. As listed in the joint communiqué issued at the close of the conference at Bogor, the main purposes of the Asian-African Conference are: “(a) to promote good will and cooperation between the nations of Asia and Africa, to explore and advance their common interests, and to establish and further friendliness and neighborly relations; (b) to consider social, economic and cultural problems and relations of the countries represented; (c) to consider problems of special interest to Asian and African peoples, for example, those affecting national sovereignty and of racialism and colonialism; (d) to view the position of Asia and Africa and their peoples in the world of today and the contribution they can make to the promotion of world peace and cooperation”...The United States should reiterate its firm opposition to the continuation of colonialism and imperialism; its intention to assist the new nations to make rapid economic and political progress; and its endorsement of their right to play their part in the solution of world problems. The U.S. should make clear

360 Powell, Jr., Adam by Adam, 105.

361 Haskins, 77.
that it not only opposes Communism but also fights for progressive goals. International Communism is the most menacing new thrust of colonialism and endangers the national aspirations of all free peoples...If communism is defeated the West will thrive and go forward...But I do say, very emphatically that fighting Communism and fighting Communism alone is not going to get us allies and win us friends in Asia and Africa. I doubt whether we can continue much longer as a first class power without the peoples of those two vast continents on our side.362

On April 19, 1955, the conference assembled Asian and African nations to discuss their problems as being newly independent countries.363 While in Bandung, Powell received attention from the United States media, and he used this opportunity to discuss United States foreign policy. U.S. News & World Report interviewed him, and his interview was sent to New York for publication.364 After returning from the conference, Powell received praised from the black and white press. Journalist Ralph McGill of the Atlanta Constitution reported that “Rep. Powell did a great service to his country.”365

In supporting his argument from a black theology viewpoint, Cone admits that “the world is small. Both politically and economically, our freedom is connected with the struggles of oppressed peoples throughout the world...Liberation knows no color bar; the very nature of the gospel is universalism, that is, a liberation that embraces the whole of humanity.”366 As a theologian and politician, Powell could successfully represent the


363 Haskins, 75.


366 Cone, Risks of Faith, 49.
concerns of oppressed individuals. He viewed the Bandung Conference as an opportunity to bring the issues of disparity to the forefront as it related to people of color.

Powell believed that the Communist countries of Russia and Red China would use to their benefit the refusal of United States to be an active participant at the conference, which proved to be accurate. The goal of Russia and Red China was to attract the new Asian and African nations to communism as well as to influence them to reject democracy. They would bolster their argument by stating that the United States would treat the Asian and African countries similar to their own minorities. In this instance, racism would prevail. Racism was Powell’s reason for urging the United States’ participation, which justified his attendance at the conference.367 Acting as an unofficial United States spokesman, Powell indicated that the conference was not anti-white.368

Powell advised the participating nations to consider all of the issues and to challenge the Communists’ platform. He was instrumental in combating the Communist influence over the emerging Asian and African nations. By attending the conference, the United States viewed Powell as a hero.369 He declared that the United States failed to address the “colored” issue on the international stage.370 Although his intentions were


369 Haskins, 78.

honorable, Powell knew by attending this conference that he would gained an international reputation for a champion of civil rights.

Powell acknowledged that the Cold War was inextricably connected to civil rights. Powell delivered a speech behind the Iron Curtain on free Europe to Polish, Hungarian, Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian, and Russian countries. He informed the European audience that he came to Europe because he felt that Europe was the key to all the world problems of freedom for all people.

I am here this year to inspect relationships between Negro and white civilians and soldiers working for my government, the United States of America, in Europe. I come to talk to you today person to person as a friend about my President’s proposal to lift the artificial curtain that divides you from me; divides your people from people. If your government is really serious about the professed desire to live at peace with the world, then why does not government throw open its borders and let you, the people, freely travel in other countries? Don’t just grant exit visas only to top ranking government and Communist party officials. Let the workers, the intellectuals, the people of your country travel in the countries of the West. We would like to see you Lithuanians and Latvians and Estonians and Poles and Hungarians and Bulgarians traveling in free countries in large numbers. The people of minorities under Soviet control would be welcomed by the people of minorities who are not under control in my part of the world, but who mix and live freely with other people. Now this is what I want to tell you as a fact not as propaganda; I tell you this as a free man talking to people who want to hear the truth and therefore be free because the old Bible says if you know the truth, the truth will make you free.371

Powell was an opponent of the spread of Communism. He thought that individuals should be liberated from any governmental authority that hindered their liberties. Powell viewed liberation as being not only a dilemma with black Americans but a dilemma globally. American foreign policy focused on promoting democracy and

---

371 Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Speech delivered behind the Iron Curtain, August 31, 1955, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.
on repressing Communism. From an international viewpoint, focusing on United States racial issues demonstrated that the American democracy’s image was tarnished.\textsuperscript{372}

In 1955, Powell was invited to Montgomery, Alabama to speak to a black citizens’ organization about the various direct action nonviolent resistance programs that he organized in New York. Powell discussed a comprehensive strategy on boycotting with the organization’s leaders. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a newcomer to Montgomery, and a member of the committee named Rosa Parks were both attendees at the meeting. On December 5, 1955, the Montgomery Bus Boycott commenced.\textsuperscript{373} Many of the boycotters persevered while many were being arrested, including Martin Luther King, Jr. Thereafter, Powell demanded that the White House convene a meeting on the Montgomery Bus Boycott. He announced that a National Observance Day of Prayer should be planned on March 28\textsuperscript{th} to bring awareness to the Montgomery predicament. He informed Abyssinians that if the Montgomery situation exacerbated that he would consider resigning from the pulpit to devote his time to the work of desegregation.\textsuperscript{374} Although Powell observed the new Civil Rights Movement with interest, he was quite cynical about the effectiveness of utilizing the tactics of nonviolence in the South. After all, he questioned the future leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr.\textsuperscript{375}

\textsuperscript{372} Dudziak, 12.

\textsuperscript{373} Powell, Jr., \textit{Adam by Adam}, 125.

\textsuperscript{374} Haygood, 212.

\textsuperscript{375} Haskins, 85.
In 1956, he organized a committee to plan a National Day of Deliverance on March 28th. On March 28th, the press published that “millions all over the world prayed for victory in Montgomery.” Powell, chairman of the National Deliverance Day of Prayer Committee, declared, “We will pray for the deliverance of all who suffer from prosecution and we will pray for the salvation of all who are afflicted with racial prejudice.” In a letter to constituents, Powell detailed his accomplishments from 1955 through 1956, which included:

On February 9, 1955, forced a probe of the lag of federal housing in the Harlem area and received assurances from Washington that these conditions would be improved; on February 25, 1955, successfully demanded the integration in the fire department of Washington, D.C.; on May 19, 1955, forced Congress, by a vote of 12 to 87, to bar segregation and discrimination in the military reserve program; on November 18, 1955, got the Department of State to send Dizzy Gillespie and other jazz artists on tours of Africa, Asia, and Europe as Good Will Ambassadors; on December 24, 1955, organized the first bi-partisan civil rights block in Congress, which led to a new holy alliance of liberal Republicans and northern Democrats; on January 28, 1956, Congress passed a bill prohibiting attack upon all members of the Armed Forces, which Powell sponsored; on February 3, 1956, demanded that the army investigate the pro-segregation talk of Major General Cathy before the Georgia State Legislature; on May 1, 1956, the Herald Tribune reported that it was due to his contact with the president that Eisenhower began to press for desegregation; on May 5, 1956, had the Civil Aeronautics Board to issue a new policy to prevent the use of federal funds permitting segregation in airport buildings; and received the 1956 Rheingold Award for Civil Rights, and the 1956 NAACP Award of the State of Maryland for his fights for civil rights.

376 Powell, Jr., *Adam by Adam*, 125.
377 Ibid.
379 Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Congressional Letter, 1956, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.
During the 1930s, most blacks were loyal to the Democratic Party. In 1956, Liberal-Labor Democrats viewed Powell's endorsement of Eisenhower as an indication that blacks were still supporting the Republican Party.\textsuperscript{380} On June 11th, Eisenhower praised Attorney General Brownell for the Supreme Court's ruling that spearheaded the desegregation of all public accommodations in the District of Columbia.\textsuperscript{381} Eisenhower recruited individuals from the motion picture industry and encouraged them to pressure the theaters in Washington to admit black patrons. Powell accused members of the administration of undermining the president's stance on segregation, and therefore, Eisenhower prevented his subordinates to hinder desegregating federal facilities. The president proclaimed, "We have not taken and we shall not take a single backward step,"\textsuperscript{382} and he further declared that "there must be no second class citizens in this country."\textsuperscript{383} Thereafter, Powell declared that statement a second "Emancipation Proclamation."\textsuperscript{384}


\textsuperscript{383} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{384} Ibid., 53.
In 1957, Powell attended the Ghanaian independence celebration as a member of Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s party. King also received an invitation from the new Prime Minister, Kwaame Nkrumah. Martin Luther King was the center of attraction at the ceremony. In Powell’s autobiography, *Adam by Adam*, he only mentioned that in March 1957 in Ghana he introduced King to Nixon. He failed to mention the nation’s independence. In late 1958, Powell revealed a long-range community relations program.

The purpose of the program is to make people aware of their responsibility to participate in the civic and governmental affairs of this nation and to remove, wherever possible, the cleavage existing between important groups of our citizens and their government. Our community has decided it will no longer continue the traditional apathetic attitude of non-participation – of letting the other fellow do it. Recent events have crystallized the movement toward individuals and organizations uniting and working harmoniously together for one common cause.

Since 1944, Tammany Hall, New York City’s Democratic Party’s political machine, carried the Powell ticket. Growing disenchanted with Powell’s politics, Tammany’s leadership attempted to unseat Powell in the 1958 congressional elections. However, in the 1958 congressional election, Powell triumphantly won his seat. In March 1960, the Internal Revenue Service’s investigation of Powell’s taxes was brought.

---


387 Daniels, 122.
to trial, which exposed his and Hazel’s exorbitant lifestyle. The Powells were charged
with defrauding the government of over $3000 based on their 1951 and 1952 tax returns.
After it was discovered that Hazel did not prepare her returns, she was exonerated of any
misdeed. On the contrary, if convicted, Powell faced a $10,000 fine and up to five years
of incarceration. Ultimately, the case was dismissed due to the jury’s indecision on
reaching a verdict. After the trial ended, Hazel finally divorced Powell.388

Before the opening of the new congressional session in 1960, Powell, newly
divorced, married Yvette Diago in Puerto Rico.389 Yvette came from a very wealthy and
influential, Puerto Rican family. Yvette’s tenure in Washington was brief. She felt very
detached living in Washington. Soon after, she returned to Puerto Rico and gave birth to
a son, Adam Diego Powell (Adamcito), in 1961.390

In November 1960, John F. Kennedy won the United States presidential
nomination over former Vice-President Richard M. Nixon. As a result of this election,
Powell visualized new hope for black Americans.391 On January 22, 1960, Congressman
Graham A. Barden, Chairman of the House Committee on Education and Labor,
announced his retirement. Since Powell was the highest-ranking Democrat on the
committee, Powell was sworn in as the new chairman. On April 14, 1961, Powell
coincided with Kennedy that he would abstain from introducing his anti-segregation

388 Chilton, 183.
389 Hamilton, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography, 337.
390 Haygood, 288.
391 Haskins, 103.
amendment from school aid legislation. Powell now possessed the influence and the status that he desired in Congress.

From a racial viewpoint, Powell assumed the responsibility of monitoring the behavior of organized labor and the federal government. He believed that blacks should have access to apprenticeship programs in the labor market, and progressive legislation should be enacted. A federal agency should not be permitted to practice or foster racial discrimination. During the 1960s, he fought for the rights of blacks to assume leadership positions in the Peace Corps, the Poverty Corps, and federal regulatory agencies, ambassadorships, cabinet positions. Moreover, he urged that the Supreme Court have black representation.

In 1962, Powell went with two female secretaries on a junket to Europe to study equal opportunities for women in the Common Market countries. While on this trip, he and his secretaries indulged in more secular activities, such as going to European nightclubs than conducting the study on equal opportunities for women. The American press declared that the trip was a “shameless junket,” and as a result, Powell interrupted his trip. Black leaders disapproved of Powell’s activities during the trip, but it was discovered that most congressmen took such trips. Critically speaking, a black congressman was being scrutinized for going on similar trips. Powell was daring and

audacious in doing whatever he felt like doing without any apologies.

By 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. and other liberal leaders encouraged blacks to participate in nonviolent demonstrations to fight for equality and to work in partnership with white people who would assist them. Notably, Malcolm X of the Nation of Islam promoted militancy in gaining equality and denounced the participation of white liberals' participation in civil rights organizations. Powell presumed that blacks favored greater militancy and the exclusion of whites from civil rights organizations. In the spring of 1963, he endorsed Malcolm X as a black leader for the black community, which infuriated many black leaders.395

Given Powell's personality of being outspoken and brash, he would not have survived very long in the Civil Rights Movement led mostly by King; therefore, endorsing Malcolm X, who was considered to be more radical than King, was the better option for him. Interestingly, well before King arrived on the scene, Powell was engaged in nonviolent movements fighting for the equality of blacks. In a 1963 interview, Powell described himself as "an irritant." He stated,

"That's it, I see myself that way. People say I passed this bill and I'm the author of that law. But I see myself as an irritant. Just to keep on turning the screw, turning the screw. Drip, drip, drip makes a hole in the marble."396

In reflecting back to 1956, Powell declared, "I say, again the time has arrived...for us to march on Washington...walk together to Washington, walk together

395 Haskins, 112-113.
396 Coleman, 29.
with Martin Luther King and those heroes of Montgomery; walk with Miss Lucy.”

He added that “there are people in this country who would rather let Communism conquer America than give colored people complete equality.”

During the March on Washington on August 28, 1963, Powell was given the ceremonial role of leading a special congressional delegation to its reserved seats among the 200,000 gathered at the Lincoln Memorial.

One of the most traumatic events occurred on November 22, 1963 was the assassination of President Kennedy. Thereafter, Lyndon B. Johnson, Vice-President under Kennedy, assumed the Presidency. Johnson was committed to civil rights legislation and was determined to continue the programs of the Kennedy administration. As early as 1959, Powell was one of the first black leaders to support Lyndon Johnson, as early as 1959.

On February 5, 1963, on the Senate, Powell was criticized by Senator John J. Williams for his alleged personal and political misconduct. The senator recounted the lavish, European junket that Powell funded at the government’s expense. As a result of this trip and his flamboyant lifestyle, his

---


398 Ibid.

399 Hamilton, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography, 368.

400 Haskins, 115-16.

401 Haygood, 296.

colleagues began to lose respect for Powell due to his irresponsible behavior.403 Williams argued that the Internal Revenue Service hardly made an attempt to collect taxes in arrears owed by Powell. In addition, he stated that Powell’s wife, Yvette, was on the payroll while working for him in Puerto Rico. Powell admitted that she translated his mail from his Spanish speaking constituents in Harlem.404 Powell was not different than any other congressman in taking advantage of certain opportunities in Congress, but because he was black, he was scrutinized for his actions.

After stating in a television interview, that Esther James was a “bag woman,” Powell was sued by her for libel. The court found him guilty and ordered him to pay $46,500 to James, since he did not appear in court. After a series of unsuccessful appeals by his attorneys, penalties were added to the judgment, which brought the sum to approximately $200,000.405 In December 1963, Powell was cited for criminal contempt because he did not pay damages to Mrs. Esther James, and the New York Supreme Court issued a warrant for his arrest.406 He could only travel to New York when Congress was in session and on Sunday to deliver his sermon at Abyssinian. Despite the fact that he could not campaign for his re-election in November 1964, he won it by a vote margin of ten to one.407

403 Daniels, 115-138.
405 Haskins, 106.
406 Powell, Jr., Adam by Adam, 157.
407 Haskins, 105.
During 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., led protest marches in Birmingham, Alabama. On July 28, Stokely Carmichael along with Powell announced a Labor Day conference. They represented two generations of black activism. Carmichael praised Powell’s civil rights record. According to Joseph, Powell initiated discussions relating to black power before Stokely.

Concerned about his reputation in Congress and in Harlem, Powell began advocating for more funding to fight poverty. Powell condemned black organizations, which he felt were disconnected with the plight of young people who lived in impoverished areas. In August 1966, he testified at a Senate hearing and urged that over the next decade $35 billion more was needed to fight poverty. Clearly, tension existed between Powell and the major civil rights leaders. He seemed convinced on denying them a key role in operating antipoverty programs. His action seemed somewhat vindictive toward some of the civil rights leader because his attempt was to gain the influence he once had as the main civil rights leader. Powell recognized that his most direct contribution to the Civil Rights Movement was to pressure the Johnson Administration to hire blacks in top policy-making positions.

---


411 Ibid., 397-400.
In Congress, Powell’s career soared in the 1960s, which was the era of the New Frontier and the Great Society. From 1961 to 1967, as chairman of the House Committee on Education and Labor, his committee produced such landmark legislation as the 1961 Minimum Wage Bill, the Vocational Education Act, the Manpower Development and Training Act, various antipoverty bills, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. When the National Defense Education Act of 1958 was up for renewal in 1964, Powell insisted that it should be expanded to cover the Humanities and Social Sciences. When the Civil Rights Act of 1964 became law, Title VI, which authorized federal agencies to withhold funding from institutions that practiced racial discrimination, the “Powell Amendment” was attached. In addition to his strong advocacy for racial equality, he challenged school segregation in the North.412

In August, Johnson’s Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 became law largely due to Powell’s assistance in expediting the bill through the House. The Economic Opportunity Act created the Office of Economic Opportunity, which Powell became its committee chairman.413 On July 2, 1964, Johnson signed the most notable civil rights legislation, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made it unlawful to discriminate in public places and in employment. It prohibited the use of federal funds to be used to promote segregation. One of the biggest achievements for Johnson and Powell was the new Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Another achievement under the Johnson

---


413 Haygood, 303.
Administration was the passing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.\footnote{Hamilton, \textit{Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography}, 378.}

In the 1960s, Powell attacked segregation in northern public schools by introducing bill, H.R. 13079. His concern was that school desegregation was not complying with the "deliberate speed" the Supreme Court in 1954 predicted. The North was faced with the de facto segregation, which left a "racial imbalance" in the school system. Powell's proposed bill defined racial imbalance "as a condition that exists in any school if the percentage of non-white pupils in the school is over 20 percent greater or less than the percentage of non-white pupils in comparable schools in the same school district."\footnote{Ibid., 389-90.} He proposed that $600 million would be used as grants to begin the process to eliminate the racial imbalance.\footnote{Ibid.} He also criticized the democratically controlled Executive agencies in the following statement:

We cannot wait for the Departments of Justice or Health, Education, and Welfare to develop any courageous consistence and make up their minds that Negro children in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C. and most northern cities are the innocent victims of a hand-me-down school system. In fact, had HEW attempted to enforce the Civil Rights Act regardless of "race, creed or region," we might have made some headway against northern de facto school segregation, in itself a social cancer as destructive of the human spirit and intellect as southern de jure segregation.\footnote{Press release: "Powell Convenes Ad Hoc Sub-Committee on De Facto School Segregation; Announces Investigation," March 7, 1966. Executive HU 2, LBJL, quoted in Charles V. Hamilton, \textit{Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography of an American Dilemma} (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1991), 391.}
Powell was always contemporary in his approach to racial issues by introducing into Congress controversial issues by utilizing the language of the American Dilemma.\footnote{Hamilton, \textit{Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography}, 391.}

During the 1960s, other black leaders emerged on the scene in America. Powell’s ability to combine political-religious ethic influenced another great leader, El Hajj Malik Shabazz, known as Malcolm X.\footnote{Alexander, \textit{Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.}, 82.} Powell and Malcolm X were very close friends because Powell provided him with a deeper understanding of Christianity. Malcolm X believed that Christianity was the religion for whites and that Islam was the religion for blacks. Powell explained to Malcolm that his understanding of Muslim concepts was incorrect and encouraged him to visit the Arab countries to learn more about Islam. After Malcolm returned from Mecca, he stated that he met exceptional, Muslim leaders who were white, and he admitted that his previous thoughts on religion were incorrect.\footnote{Powell, Jr., \textit{Adam by Adam}, 243-244.} In a remark, Malcolm stated the significance of the political-religious ethic that Powell had developed.

Before we try to explain what is meant by the ballot or the bullet, I would like to clarify something concerned myself. I’m still a Muslim, my religion is Islam. That’s my personal belief. Just as Adam Clayton Powell is a Christian minister who heads the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York, but at the same time takes part in political struggles to try and bring about rights to black people in this country.\footnote{George Breitman (Editor), \textit{Malcolm X Speaks} (New York: Merit Publishers, 1965), 23, quoted in E. Curtis Alexander, \textit{Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: A Black Power Political Educator}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (New York: ECA Associates, 1983), 83.}

The temperament of the black community changed in 1966, which was a change
from the Civil Rights Movement to the Black Power movement. Cone defines black power as “full emancipation of Black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary.” In the South, Martin Luther King and other black leaders founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). In 1960, the SCLC provided the finances to form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The committee’s purpose was to organize direct protests for college students. From 1960 through 1965, SCLC and SNCC were the impetus behind the nonviolent civil rights demonstrations. Under President Lyndon B. Johnson, official discrimination was abolished in with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In the summer of 1964, SNCC focused on a voting campaign to get blacks registered in the South. In the summer 1965, SNCC returned to the South to conduct another voter registration campaign. Thereafter, SNCC experienced a power struggle. Stokely Carmichael led the faction that opted for more militancy. During the summer of 1966, SNCC’s image evolved into an action call of “Black Power!”

Carmichael and his adherents believed that black power could be interpreted in many different ways by many individuals. Seemingly, SNCC seemed to lack a definition for black power and no specific goals as conveyed by the press. Because of this ambiguity, Powell decided to take action to connect with this new militant movement.

---

422 Haskins, 120.
423 Cone, Risks of Faith, 4.
425 Haskins, 120-122.
He thought that black power should be defined for blacks and whites. Moreover, Carmichael praised Powell and Muhammad Ali as icons of black power.

Shortly after the introduction of the black power slogan, Powell hosted a conference on black power. A position paper was released to the press, which asked for my funding for cities, calling for more money for the cities, improved voting rights protection, and an assertive attitude of blacks who wanted to become politically involved. Unfortunately, the outcome of the conference did little to advance the Black Power movement.

Suitably, Powell was known as "the Father of the Modern Black Power Movement among blacks in the United States." In a major address at Howard University in 1966, Powell used the phrase black power. During his childhood, he was exposed to the presence of Marcus Garvey in Harlem. The Garveyites' pride permeated Powell's consciousness, which represented blackness. Powell viewed black power as a form of godly power. Powell accepted that "the notion of black power in the black church has always from its inception exemplified a strong sense of self-awareness and

---

426 Ibid., 122.
427 Joseph, Stokely, 152.
428 Haskins, 123.
429 Haygood, 325.
430 Haskins, 123.
432 Haygood, 322.
The black church has always been the cornerstone of protest for blacks in their struggle for freedom. In applying black power to the church, Cone asserts that "the church's work and message is nothing other than a continuation of the message and work of Christ." In the Harlem community, Powell and his parishioners demonstrated that the church was an instrument in providing for the needs of others.

In August 1966, Powell was interviewed by a reporter from the U.S. News and World Report about the black leaders' views on the meaning of black power. Powell made the following remarks: "Well, upon the suggestion of the two new leaders, Stokely Carmichael and Floyd McKissick, I am convening here in Washington...a national conference...to discuss what black power means...to get together a position paper and to set out the aims and directions for the future."

Overall, Powell's position was to instill pride and present blacks with a challenge to advance towards equality. Powell often made remarks pertaining to black pride and the value of economic and political self-sufficiency for blacks. The major theme of the Black Power movement was black pride. Powell encouraged black activism in an effort to gain more economic independence. Powell recognized how the concentration on black political power could get qualified blacks elected. Powell proposed a philosophy of

---

433 Alexander, 73.
434 Ibid.
435 Cone, Risks of Faith, 10.
nonviolent protest that would eradicate de facto and de jure racial segregation. He worked to increase the presence of blacks on the voter registration rolls. Powell believed that violence between the races was a recipe for disaster. His philosophy of nonviolence offered a reasonable alternative for blacks who resorted to violence. The emergence of black power was a defining moment in black religious thought. Black power compelled black clergy to address the theological question about the nexus between black faith and white religion. Black power was “understood as the theological arm of black power.”

Powell’s vision not only exemplified “black power” for blacks, but it helped to enhance the image the United States to the “Third World.” According to Powell, “black is God given.” Powell believed in the tenets of western civilization, which is the Christian – Judeo heritage. His belief was also founded on his interpretation of the Declaration of Independence. He believed that what “blacks are suffering from and white America is suffering from also is a fragmentation of leadership. There is no leader among blacks, and there is no leader among whites.”

---


438 Cone, “Black Theology in American Religion,” 768.

439 Cone, Risks of Faith, 42.

440 Alexander, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., 74, 77.

441 Ibid.

442 Powell, Jr., Adam by Adam, 244.
During a visit from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Powell told King that nonviolence had become obsolete. He confessed that King told him that he was abandoning total nonviolence. While Powell was at a speaking engagement, he told reporters that King had abandoned total nonviolence, which was reported during a meeting in Washington, D.C. Immediately, during a press conference, King denied making this statement. Later, Powell wrote that King delivered a sermon at the Riverside Baptist Church in New York City where he alluded that he could no longer endorse the notion of total nonviolence as long “as my nation is the greatest purveyor of violence in the world.”

Powell’s Later Years

Powell’s last effective year in Congress was 1966. In 1966, some members of Congress made a motion to bar Powell from the House. In September, led by Congressman Wayne Hays, the House convened a special subcommittee to investigate the records of the Education and Labor Committee and the activities of Powell. The investigation examined Powell’s absenteeism, the warrant for his arrest in New York, charges indicating committee money spent inappropriately, adding his wife on the congressional payroll, charging leisure trips, and mismanaging his congressional expense account. Powell justified his absences based on poor health, but he responded to other accusations with charges of racism.

---

443 Ibid., 242-243.

444 Haskins, 124.
In January 1967, Congress began a new term, but Powell remained in Bimini over the Christmas holidays. On January 9, 1967, the Democratic Caucus appointed Carl Perkins of Kentucky to the chairmanship of Education and Labor and removed Powell as chairman. During the opening of the new session of Congress, all elected candidates were sworn in except Powell. Well-known black leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr., Roy Wilkins, A. Philip Randolph, and Bayard Rustin, issued potent statements denouncing the exclusion of Powell. Rather ironic, that Powell stood in opposition of these leaders, but they eventually came to his rescue. After Powell was denied his seat in the House of Representatives and later censured by the House, these actions were viewed by blacks as a racial tactic. In response, the black press wholeheartedly supported Powell.

During early 1967, Stokely Carmichael spent time defending Powell. Stokely addressed demonstrators protesting the action the House had taken against Powell. Apparently, Carmichael was the most noticeable Powell supporter. Powell applauded Carmichael in “an effort to assert himself as the pragmatic godfather of the entire black power enterprise.” In a speech, Powell told demonstrators to withhold their federal taxes as a means of protest. He proclaimed that “this building houses the biggest

---

447 Joseph, Stokely, 174-175.
448 Ibid.
bunch of elected hypocrites in the world.”449 His speech suggested creating an additional political party and plans to promote political revolutions.450

In January 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. sent a telegram to Powell in support of him.

For the last several weeks I have been out of circulation completing a book that I am writing for spring publication. However I could not help watching from my far away retreat the screaming headlines which finally led to the loss of your chairmanship and the temporary loss of your seat. I watched these events with shock and dismay. I never felt that it would happen. I watched the false piety of this Congress as it singled you out for punishment while elevating a racist like Colmar of Mississippi to the Chairmanship of the House Rules Committee. I watched this same Congress overlook the many junkets that other Congressmen have taken at taxpayers’ expense. It portends the retrogression that we will see in this session of Congress. It is a part of the same old white backlash that has eternally vacillated, hesitated, and practiced hypocrisy concerning Negro rights. I know these are difficult days for you and for all of us but somehow we must keep the lamp of hope burning. As a preacher, you know as I do, that God still has the power to make a way out of no way and transform dark and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of inner peace. Do not allow this political setback to get you down. Be assured that you have a host of friends who still remember when you were pioneering with Olympian courage and for Negro rights on the streets of Harlem; when you were fighting in the City Council of New York; when you were struggling with a recalcitrant Congress and nation for an end to segregation in education; when you were authoring and implementing through your committee chairmanship some of the most significant economic and social legislation in the nation. When even Presidents acknowledged that you were the best chairman on Capitol Hill. As a friend, a fellow clergyman, a fellow civil rights leaders, and a fellow soldier in the army of the Lord, I want you to know that even though I am far away, I share your burdens and trials and be assured that you do not walk alone. I hope you will see this whole episode not as a stumbling block and a defeat, thereby developing a defeatist attitude, but as an opportunity, indeed a stepping stone to higher levels of service to your black brothers and sisters in the United States. Keep the faith, keep looking up, and the God that you preach about so eloquently will continue to be with you. I hope it will be possible to talk with you soon as I get back in the country in about a month.451


450 Ibid.

451 Martin Luther King, Jr., Telegram to Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., January 11, 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. Collection, Robert Woodruff Library Archives, Atlanta University Center.
In 1967, the House voted that Powell be excluded from Congress. In the federal
district court, Powell filed a suit to challenge his exclusion from Congress on March 8,
1967. A special election was scheduled on April 11, 1967 to fill the vacancy, and
thereafter, Powell announced his candidacy. During the 1968 election, Powell spent
most of his time in Bimini and began developing a relationship with Darlene Expose.

In January 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote the following letter to Powell to
encourage him to return to New York:

After my very meaningful and enjoyable visit with you in Bimini, I returned to the
States enthusiastically ready, as per your suggestion, to announce in a press
conference your pending return to the States, and my agreement to be with you on
that return along with other Negro leaders. Just before my planned press conference,
I ran into Bill Kunstler in New York and gave him the joyous news. He was deeply
inspired to hear of your willingness to return. He felt however, that my
announcement of your return in advance would arouse so much publicity that
pressure from the white community in New York would force the sheriff to arrest you
immediately. He felt it would be better to allow your lawyers in New York to make a
quiet, non-publicized arrangement with the sheriff to carry through a technical arrest
at the airport in New York and release you on bail immediately. Then, the lawyers
would proceed forth with to file your appeal. I, along with other leaders, could meet
you at the airport and then proceed with you to Harlem, announcing at that time a
mammoth mass meeting and welcome ceremony for this day or two following. I
talked with Bob Carter—another of your attorneys—concerning Bill Kunstler’s
suggestion and he strongly concurred. He felt that this approach would assure you
not having to serve one minute in jail and it would prevent the possibility of a riot
developing if they attempted to arrest you in Harlem, the occurrence of which would,
his felt, intensify opposition to you being re-seated in Congress. Incidentally, Bob
Carter and Bill Kuntsler are convinced that the appeal in your contempt case would
lead to a reversal of the decision to arrest you for ninety days. They contend that
judges have all but admitted that particular contempt charge was illegal in that it
should have been civil contempt instead of criminal contempt. They are absolutely
convinced that the decision would be reversed...Let me conclude by saying that I

452 Hamilton, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography, 457, 463.

453 Haskins, 130.
have talked with numerous people since I returned from Bimini. The enthusiasm for your return is unanimously great. It is my feeling that your return is a must. It is a must not only for your sake but for the sake of twenty two million black people in the United States. The terrible injustice that Congress inflicted upon you was an insult to every black man. We have so few symbols of power as a people, and every time racist America cuts one down it only deepens our despair. You, more than any other Negro American, rose to a position of great power, you beat the white man at his own game, and became a fighting symbol of power. A failure to return on your part would give the white power structure the impression that Negroes can be treated any kind of way... With this faith we will be able to adjourn the councils of despair and bring new light into the dark chambers of pessimism.454

In the Esther James case, the court ordered Powell to pay Esther James $46,500.455 Thereafter, early in 1968, Powell agreed to pay the original penalty in the Esther James case, and as a result, the additional penalties were dismissed. He began paying the damages to Esther James, and soon after, the court voided its warrant for his arrest. After four years, he was free to return to Harlem.456

In 1968, Powell won the Democratic nomination for the November general election. Against the odds, Powell was loved by Harlem loved, and Harlem wanted him to continue to be its congressman. When Powell returned to Congress, he lost his 22 years of seniority. He was relegated to the role of a freshman member of Congress. During this session, he retaliated by attending only five percent of the total roll calls. Presumably, Powell was suffering from lymph cancer and was undergoing cobalt

454 Martin Luther King, Jr., Letter to Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., January 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. Collection, Robert Woodruff Library Archives, Atlanta University Center.

455 Powell, Jr., Adam by Adam, 157.

456 Haskins, 133.
treatments. Meanwhile, he spent most of his time in Bimini and not in Harlem.457

On Sundays, Powell continued preaching at Abyssinian, but mostly, he began traveling around the country making speeches. His speeches became incendiary, and he spoke to college audiences about a menacing, “power structure” conspiracy, which contributed to deaths of the Kennedys and King.458 He continued to oppose the Vietnam War, and if racial justice was not achieved, he concluded that American urban communities would suffer disaster. He added that nonviolence would be replaced with violence. He stated that “he saw no future for the country as long as it continued its exploitative policies at home and its ‘imperialist’ policies abroad.”459 Inevitably, his speeches on college campuses were attracting the FBI’s attention.460

Powell’s leadership began to fade, and in the 1970 primary election, he lost to Charles Rangel. Powell demanded a recount, but he did not prevail as the chosen candidate. In court, he sought a new election, but he was denied one. With the loss of the election, Powell began to realize that his power base as a leader had disintegrated.461

After the election, Powell returned to Bimini and planned to write a book about his life. He also told the church that he was retiring. On April 4, 1972, he suffered complications from prostate surgery in Bimini and was flown immediately to Jackson


459 Ibid.

460 Ibid., 474.

461 Orr, 90.
Memorial Hospital in Miami, Florida where he later died.\textsuperscript{462} On April 9, 1972, a funeral was held at Abyssinian Baptist Church. Rev. Samuel D. Proctor led members of the clergy in eulogizing Powell. Rev. Gardner C. Taylor of Brooklyn's Concord Baptist Church shared the following remarks: "He was born to walk a royal road... When Adam was born, nature played a trick on America. He was born among the oppressed but with a kingly presence, a nimble mind, courage and audacity – what the old people used to call 'a sassiness.'\textsuperscript{463} His body was cremated in the Bahamas, and his ashes was scattered over the waters near Bimini. Soon after, in his honor, Seventh Avenue was renamed the Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Boulevard in Harlem.\textsuperscript{464}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{462} Hamilton, \textit{Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography}, 478.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{464} Hamilton, \textit{Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography}, 478, 487.
\end{flushright}
CHAPTER 4
ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF BLACK THEOLOGY ON
POWELL’S SERMONS AND SPEECHES

In his ministry at Abyssinian, Powell prioritized essential beliefs about God and humanity. He included a belief that encompassed an understanding of the relationships among humans and between each human and God. The authors of Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith and Practice at the Abyssinian Baptist Church of Harlem, New York asserts, “Before black theology would become part of the religious lexicon, Powell declared that Christianity demanded observance of both a vertical and a horizontal relationship with God.” A person’s journey with God is distinct from the walk that Christians have with each other.¹

Early in his career at Abyssinian, Powell declared that he believed that Christianity in America injured God’s will and true democracy. He proclaimed, “Next to our foreign policy no institution in our American life is more hypocritical and therefore does more hurt the cause of God and the cause of democracy than our so-called Christian church…. [or] lack of Christianity.”² Frankly, he denounced racial discrimination that was embraced by any Christian church. He told congregants, “I say that any church that

¹ McNeil et. al., Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith, 174-175.
in any way preaches or practices anything that will exclude anyone from membership is negating the power of Christ."³

Powell’s Sermons

Based on his belief, Powell concluded that Christianity practiced by whites was both ungodly and immoral. From his perspective, he preached the following:

Drawing near to God cannot be accomplished, nor even the initial steps taken, until one has purged himself of all hatred...This is why I view askance the average white man’s religion; and in this religion of his I include not just his church but the whole priesthood of believers and preachers, his institutions of theological learning and his outer projection of his religion into the community and the whole world.⁴

In terms of Christianity, Powell viewed it in “a distinctive and central teaching concerning Jesus Christ as the unique incarnation of the Word of God, preeminently manifested in the historic person, on the ground that his moral character perfectly represents the character and purpose of the invisible holy God.”⁵ According to Powell, Christianity revealed that society had a sacred ethical nature and “that every human being should be brought lovingly into the comprehensive brotherhood of humanity under the universal thought, whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his

---

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Alexander, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., 31.
Powell did not consider that religion should be worldly oriented. He envisioned the church’s function evolving by necessity. When he discussed the religious needs of blacks, this relation between function and belief was illuminated. He contended that the black church achieved the renewal of racial self-awareness, pride, and self-respect.\(^7\)

Implementing the belief of unity and worth, Powell advocated for the eradication of segregation, economic misuse, dehumanization and the elevation of blacks’ intellectual level to higher heights. His belief originated from his religious beliefs and translated into motivating individuals to become better by promoting themselves out of their environment.\(^8\) Powell was the voice of disenfranchised black Americans. “Keep the Faith, baby!” he would exclaim from the streets to the pulpit.\(^9\)

Since the 1930s, the congregation focused its attention on the increasing international crisis. In January 1936, Powell told his congregation: “It is imperative that the twelve million Negroes of America and the hundreds of millions of the darker people on this earth realize that Nazism is deeply committed to persecuting the blacks of this


\(^7\) Alexander, *Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.*, 31-32.

\(^8\) Ibid., 31.

\(^9\) Chilton, 105.
world.” Powell believed that “fascism comes closer. Minds must be purged of divisive prejudice.”

On January 26, 1936 and on February 9, 1936, Powell delivered his sermon, “A Plea for Christian Liberalism,” at Abyssinian Baptist Church. In his sermon, he stated,

We think Nazism is the German’s problem, but Angelo Herndon, the Scottsboro boys, fort-seven labor deaths in 1936, 20 lynchings, criminal syndicalism trials, two million sharecroppers, 500 silicosis deaths are irrefutable evidence that America is fertile soil in which to sow the seeds of Nazism... We Negroes in the North have a feeling of security that makes us indifferent to our fellows’ problem in the South. We think that we are secure, that freedom is real here. It can happen here, too. Let’s not fool ourselves. I call upon you this morning to embrace new ways for old. Give up your conservatism of indifference and embrace the living liberalism of justice! He stated, “first, it is un-Christian and therefore sinful to be a conservative... There are first things which must be first, but when it comes to protecting liberty and fighting for justice. I say it is un-Christian-like to be a conservative... Secondly, to be a liberal doesn’t mean you must be a Communist, socialist or anarchist, but it means that you must first be a man. Thirdly, love justice. Fourth, be merciful. Fifth, be humble.

Abyssinians related to the predicament of the German Jews under Adolf Hitler.

In December 1938, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee publicized in the New York Times that “the congregation of Abyssinian Baptist Church...has contributed

---


$130.00 for the aid of Christian Jewish refugees” from Germany. From a global perspective, Powell wanted to illustrate that Abyssinians embraced the Christian message of compassion and love for one’s neighbor. Powell professed: “I personally feel that it is significant when the Negro people, as poverty-stricken and oppressed as they are, are yet willing to gladly make this contribution.” In relation to black theology, Cone states that “our vision must be enlarged to connect with other oppressed people, so that all victims would be able dictate their history to create a new humanity.”

Clearly, Powell believed conservatism had no place in Christianity. A Christian needed to be a liberal to impact any changes in society. Cone indicates that “the sin of American theology is that is has spoken without passion. It has failed miserably in relating its work to the oppressed in society by refusing to confront the structures of this nation with the evils of racism...black theology rejects this approach and views theology as a participation in passion on behalf of the oppressed.” Based on American theology, Powell knew that Christians had to adopt a more militant approach to conquer the evils of society.

---


14 Ibid.

15 Cone, Risks of Faith, 46-47.

16 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 18.
On August 6, 1939, Powell delivered a sermon “Revolt in the Pew,” he stated:

The most individualized self-centered institution in the world is the church, and the Negro church in particular. The deacons and deaconesses think they are gods and goddesses, the trustees think they are archangels, the pastor thinks he is Jesus Christ himself, and the pew is completely ignorant. The crying need of the hour is a revolt in the pew. We must realize that Christianity is not Christianity but is essentially a religion for the mass. It was a religion, as mapped out by Jesus Christ, that never set up a church, ordained a preacher nor attracted a quiescent pew. The secret of the early church was the fact there was no fundamental difference between the men and women of the pew and those of the pulpit. The early church fed the people, healed them, proclaimed the truth and sought to lead them along the paths of freedom...A leaderless mass, however, not only slows up civilization but destroys it. Leadership is one of the most misused weapons of society...True leaders is not individualism...In the Christian religion, the highest authority is the authority of the mass as given to us by God...If there must be a revolt in the pew, then there must be a purge of the pulpit. Leadership that is true to the people is lacking in our race. We have the misleadership of the pulpit. The hour has struck not only for a revolt in the pew, but for purge of the pulpit. True leadership comes from the mass. The Negro pulpit must be responsible to the mass...The trouble with Negro leaders is that they have too many irons in the fire, too many axes to grind.17

The above sermon demonstrated Powell’s leadership style. He often adopted “priestly, prophetic, and political leadership” types. Often in his sermons, he delivered messages relative to racial injustice. In addition, he was able to utilize “his prophetic orientation within Congress by using his Powell Amendment.”18 In black theology, Cone asserts that “when the black preacher is true to his/her vocational calling, he/she must speak the truth of God regardless of who is affected by its judgment.”19

17 Ibid.
18 Paris, 25.
19 Cone, Risks of Faith, 71.
understood that authentic leadership was an essential factor in leading the masses. He criticized black leadership, particularly black preachers, in the effort of inadequately providing guidance to blacks. He felt that preachers had a moral obligation to their members and needed to practice what they preached.

Powell articulated that religion was originated by God. Relating to Jesus Christ in black theology, Cone supports this assertion by stating that “Christian theology begins and ends with Jesus Christ. He is the point of departure for everything to be said about God, humankind, and the world...To speak of the Christian gospel is to speak of Jesus Christ who is the content of its message and without whom Christianity ceases to be.”

On September 3, 1939, Powell delivered his sermon, The Living God,” at Abyssinian Baptist Church. In his sermon, he emphasized:

Humanism says religion is in man’s heart...Communism says it is religion...Without wasting any time, may I put them aside by saying that religion begins and ends with God. Any religion that rules God out of the equation is not religion. It is a system, it is a philosophy, it is a code, it is an institution, but it is not religion...To understand what religion is, all one needs to do is in the cool of the evening to walk with God.

Essentially, Powell believed that religion did not define a person’s faith in God.

Seemingly, he stressed that an individual should have a personal relationship with God that did not involve any type of religious structure. In relation to black theology, Cone

---

20 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 110.

supports what Powell said, "Christianity begins and ends with the Man Jesus – his life, death, and resurrection. He is the essence of Christianity."\textsuperscript{22}

In a sermon, Powell preached that the black church comprehended the fundamental relationship between the Christian moral philosophy and his concept of "black power." Powell acknowledged the significance of having the knowledge of the enemy.\textsuperscript{23} In relation to the fight for civil rights legislation, he stated:

When the average Negro is asked who his enemies are, he will immediate reply, "Wallace, Maddox, Eastland and Thurmond." This, of course, is true, but I say this morning that we have some enemies within our race and forces working against our progress that we seemingly are not conscious of. I can think of five.

1. Divisions among ourselves.
2. Misleadership.
3. Indifference toward our own problems.
4. Refusal to use civil rights and divine rights which we ALREADY POSSESS.
5. An endless and vain search for a substitute for the Negroes' church in politics, education, economics and social life...

This is the crying need of the hour for our people, for us ourselves, to restore to the individual his supreme worth as a human being. It can only be accomplished through the Negroes' church...\textsuperscript{24}

In supporting Powell's claim in above sermon, Cone mentions that "black power and black religion are inseparable. Both seek to free black people from white racism...It is impossible for black religion to be truly related to the condition of black people and to

\textsuperscript{22} Cone, \textit{Risks of Faith}, 7.

\textsuperscript{23} Alexander, \textit{Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.}, 73.

the message of Jesus Christ without emphasizing the basic tenets of black power.”25

Clearly, Powell directed blacks to look inwardly to solve some of the problems within the black community. In reference to black theology and black power, Powell encouraged blacks to have a sense of pride and to be accountable to the community.

In a sermon at Abyssinian Baptist Church, Powell stated that the church must recapture its social responsibilities from politicians. He preached the following:

The church is the only hope for civilization. It is the only hope left to our nation. America has not made a single original contribution to civilization except the Negro spiritual and the atomic bomb. If we are to maintain any semblance of civilization during this coming four years of decadence, man’s only hope will be the Church. When I say the Church, I do not mean the Christian Church, I mean the Church. For our hope to be realized the Church must be as broad as possible. Even the ecumenical movement has its limitations because it is a world council of Christian churches. What we need is a world council of faiths.26

Apparently, Cone agrees with Powell’s assertion. In Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, Cone condemns the black church for not adequately rendering services to the power. He contends that the church fails at “being a visible manifestation of God’s intention for humanity and proclaiming the message of the gospel to the world.”27 Powell viewed the black church as failing at being the cornerstone in the community by offering hope to the oppressed. He believed that the

25 Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, 130.


27 Cone, Risks of Faith, 11.
church needed to assume its role in fighting for the oppressed.

In Powell’s sermon to the Annual Brotherhood on February 22, 1959, he outlined steps that black leaders should take to assume a progressive leadership role.

First, we must totally liberate every Negro in these United States from those who would enslave him. Desegregation is not enough; that is only the beginning. In those sections where the Negro can move freely, he must have the money to defray the necessary expenses. Though desegregation releases the Negro to sail the sea of democracy, to join the tide of freedom, he is currently shipwrecked on the banks of integration.” He indicated that “second, armed with the Christian spirit Negro leaders ought to be in the front ranks of international relations that they may apply the Christian spirit which is imperative in this world which science has created. For the Holy Bible and the words of Jesus have been falsified in so many different ways to serve such multiplicities of sects, of fancies, of ambitions in the history of tyranny, that it is for the Negro, the longest sufferers in this country from Christian denial to fulfill the gospel by adjusting the message of Christ, the hope of Lincoln and the faith of Douglass to the preservation of mankind.28

From a black theology’s viewpoint, “to preach the gospel means confronting the world with the reality of Christian freedom.”29 In essence, Powell confronted the issue of blacks leader not addressing the issue of liberation. He believed that black leaders needed to take a proactive approach to the race problem in America.

According to Cone, “Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., embraced that part of the black religious tradition that refused to separate the Christian gospel from the struggle for justice in society.”30 On July 3, 1960, Powell delivered a sermon entitled, “Let’s Give

---


29 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 131.

Up Our Own Prejudices.” In his sermon, he preached the following:

What are we against – all prejudices, or just southern prejudices? As we celebrate today, the words stand before us: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” Is not this what the minorities are fighting for? Must we not be willing to give that which we want others to give us? Our teenage “sit-ins” strikers in the South are finding many white southern students marching with them side by side. The prejudice which the Negro and the northerner have against the southerner is mainly in the heart and mind of the older Negro. If the older Negro retains his prejudice and our “sit-in” strikers continue to register impacts on an interracial basis, then we may discover that most of our radicals next year will moderates and our NAACP will be Uncle Toms...I have been preaching during the past years that America needs the maturity of the free Negro to lead the way out of the suburbs of mediocrity into the centers of excellence where America can stand once again with strength...But no Negro is free who is not free from prejudice. And no Negro is mature who does not rise above racism and regionalism.31

Indeed, Powell viewed black power as being aligned with God’s will, as seen in the following sermon. He indicated “that black power and divine power are not dissimilar.”32 To reinforce his support of black power, Powell preached a sermon at Howard University in 1966 and stated that “to demand these God-given human rights is to seek black power, what I call audacious power – the power to build black institutions of splendid achievement.”33 For a period of time, he believed that black Americans could save America and viewed black power as means of empowerment.34 In his sermon,


33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.
"Black Power: A Form of Godly Power," Powell stated:

Let me go back to March 28, 1965, when I spoke in Chicago and presented a "Black Position Paper for America's 20 million Negroes." At that time I called for black people to seek "audacious power." Audacious power is the power that begins with the stand-up-and-be-counted racial pride in being black and thinking black. "I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem," said the peasant girl in the Song of Solomon. On that same day, I outlined a seventeen-point plan for black people to build this "audacious power" within the Great Society. It is kind of "Black Operation Bootstrap." I urged black people to mobilize their political, economic, financial and educational power to build their communities into neighborhoods of excellence...."35

In black theology, Cone asserts that "revelation, in the biblical perspective, is inseparable from those with faith to perceive it. Faith, then, is the perspective which enables human beings to recognize God's actions in human history."36 Powell emotionally urged his listeners to "Keep the faith," [despite the inequities they encounter], and he called upon them to ever seek the truth.37 The following excerpts are from his sermon, "Keep the Faith, Baby":

As I walk the streets of the Harlems of the world, the black Harlems and the white Harlems, people are depressed. They are frustrated, they are downtrodden. They see no hope, they see no tomorrows. And I say to them always, Keep the faith, baby! I say that this because all over the world people are not receiving God. They're not getting the assurances that once were given. Promises have been broken, and their dawn refuses to rise...Too long have they waited in vain, black and white, poor and illiterate, for the better jobs, better housing, better education, better hospitals...They have no hope, and I say to them, Keep the faith, baby! Keep the faith! Because God's


36 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 47.

realities always exceed man’s fondest dreams... He’ll take care of things, He’ll make a way out of no way, He’ll open doors that no one can open and shut doors that no one can shut. And it won’t be long before he proves it, too. Keep the faith in yourself!... You may be small to your oppressors, but you’re bigger in your self-respect as a human being because as a human being nobody is better than you are. All human beings, black and white, rich and poor, are equal in the sight of God... Keep your faith, baby! Walk together, talk together, love together, worship together, live together, and we’ll win tomorrow! Because God has no other hands than our hands, he has no other feet than our feet, and he has no other tongue than our tongue. Keep the faith, keep the faith, baby!38

In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone states that “black theology is a theology of liberation because it is a theology which arises from an identification with the oppressed blacks of America, seeking to interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of the black condition. It believes that the liberation of the black community is God’s liberation.”39 Being relevant to black theology, the gospel of Jesus Christ resonated in Powell’s sermons and speeches. He wanted his audiences to visualize the suffering that existed between Jesus and the oppressed. He wanted people to have hope in Jesus in delivering them from sin and giving them freedom. He equated Jesus delivering people from sin with the oppressed being delivered from discrimination. He illustrated how Jesus delivered people from sin in his sermon, “And All They That Heard It Wondered.” He preached that “Jesus the Wonderful came as a deliverer. He delivers people from sin; from the guilt of sin, from the grief of sin; from the pain of sin; from the penalty of sin;

38 Ibid.

from the power of sin... Only through Him was this tide of humanity made to turn."

In Powell's sermons and speeches, common themes resonated that align with the tenets of black theology. In most of his sermons, he highlighted the conditions of the oppressed. His ministry spanned over almost 50 decades from the Great Depression to the post-civil rights era, so he was able to witness and address social issues that impacted the oppressed community.

Powell's Speeches

Successfully, Powell maintained his Abyssinian political base independent of the city politics. In elections, he recruited members from his congregation to campaign on his behalf. The church became "a kind of political-party club in its own right." According to Professor Charles V. Hamilton, "the Powell-Abyssinian Baptist Church alliance and result could not be duplicated exactly in other parts of the country, but there are many instances in which black preachers have relied heavily on their church as a springboard into politics."

The church provided for its parishioners' economic needs and individuals in the community who needed assistance help. A patronage system was established, and as his

---

40 Powell, Jr., *Keep The Faith*, 3-5.


42 Ibid.
foundation, the church provided strength to Powell through national and local political challenges. His Sunday morning sermons were political speeches, and the church gave him the support to become one of America’s most influential leaders.\textsuperscript{43} Former Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm of New York stated once that “he gave courage and leadership to a people who were hungry for someone to enunciate their feelings and their grief.”\textsuperscript{44}

From early in his political career, Powell’s speeches reflected the tenets of black theology. He often spoke about fighting oppression. In subscribing to black theology, Cone states that “because black theology is a survival theology, it must speak with a passion consistent with the depths of the wounds of the oppressed. Theological language is a passionate language, the language of commitment because it is language which seeks to vindicate the afflicted and condemn the enforcers of evil.”\textsuperscript{45} The following speech is filled with passionate language and commitment. On June 7, 1943 at Madison Square Garden, Powell delivered the following speech to 40,000 people.

\begin{quote}
We are here because we have the freedom to struggle for freedom. We are here because America needs us. We are here because America cannot win the peace without us. We are here for victory over Hitlerism abroad and at home.” He further exclaimed that “the new Negro is united – one people! The new Negro is fighting – one purpose! The new Negro is following – one leadership! The destiny of the new Negro is the destiny of the world. Without the Negro, there can be no durable peace, no lasting postwar society. No century of the common man, and
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{44} Adam Clayton Powell, DVD, Directed by Richard Kilberg (New York: Docurama, 1989.

\textsuperscript{45} Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 17.
no four freedoms... Wherever there is injustice I must cry out. Wherever there is oppression I must fight it. Wherever there is slavery I cannot live. This is my conscience whispers, posterity pleads, destiny commands and God dictates. My cry today until the day I die is and ever shall be Let My People Go – Now!46

Vehemently, Powell spoke against lynching crimes in the South. He challenged the government to remedy such atrocities immediately. He demonstrated his concern for oppressed individuals by identifying with their circumstances, which is an element of black theology. Cone articulates that “black theology is a theology of liberation because it is a theology which arises from an identification with the oppressed blacks of America, seeking to interpret the gospel of Jesus in the light of the black condition.”47 In a press release issued on July 28, 1946, Powell preached the following sermon to his congregation.

We Negroes in the North cannot get even with barbaric lynch murderers of Georgia... We cannot make any progress by striking back. We must, however, militantly demand that the established agencies of law and order beginning with the President of the United States, the Attorney General of the United States, and the Governor of Georgia, immediately apprehend these criminals and execute swift justice... America can no longer be called a Christian nation nor a democratic one... we have turned our backs on God, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights... What happened in Georgia is just another link in the chains of slavery which American fascists are wrapping around the hearts of Negro people.”48

Cone contends that “blacks are oppressed socially even if they have economic and

---

46 Adam Clayton Powell, Madison Square Garden Speech on June 7, 1943, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.

47 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 4-5.

intellectual power.” Powell was seeking equal representation of blacks in the political system. By gaining such equality, blacks would be able to position themselves to participate in the political process. On January 17, 1953, Powell outlined ten points for the incoming administration to address immediately in his speech at the City Club of Cleveland, Ohio:

"First, the bi-partisan Jim Crow policy set by the Dixiecrats and supported by the vast majority of Republican legislatures must be broken and a new bi-partisan human rights policy established. Second, as promised by Mr. Eisenhower, Jim Crow in the Capitol of our nation must immediately be abolished. This is not only a continual insult to Americans but is one of the great sore points thrust upon visiting dignitaries of countries we are trying to make our allies. Third, there are scarcely 50 Negroes in representative position in the various consulates and embassies of our government. This number should immediately and radically be increased so that throughout the world, peoples of other nations will see in their own land evidence of democracy at work. Fourth, a Negro should be named ambassador to the Soviet Russia. This would seriously damage Stalin's world appeal to colored peoples and make a farce of the Robeson line in America. Fifth, Mr. Eisenhower must change his views as expressed to the U.S. armed services committee April 27, 1948, and accelerate the integration program in the armed services especially the army itself, abroad and at home. Sixth, the McCarran Act must be amended so that it will stop being an insult to the very people whom we are courting thru the Marshall Plan and Point Four Aid. Seventh, police brutality in northern as well as southern cities must be stopped by the Department of Justice, Civil Rights section through the use of the federal grand jury. Eighth, crime and the control of labor unions by criminals must be brought to an end by federal action and new federal laws, if necessary. Ninth, the Taft-Hartley Act must be revised and in its revision, the “lily-white” union such as the Railroad Brotherhood should be made exempt from any of its benefits. Tenth, Republicans must stop talking about cutting taxes and tell the American public the truth. We are so committed to a global conflict that there cannot be any cessation of taxation, even if we recovered the unexpended balances of our government agencies that would only be for one year.\footnote{Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.,"The Fight to Save America," January 16, 1953, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.}

\footnote{Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 15.}
In his speech, Powell articulated that the United States could not possibly practice democracy abroad if it was not practicing it at home. Seemingly, he implied in this speech that the United States must assume the role of the civil rights leader in a national setting and in a global setting.

Cone asserts that "black theology, responding to the black condition, takes on the character of rebellion against things as they are...In black theology, blacks are encouraged to revolt against the structures of white social and political power by affirming blackness." In the following speech, Powell advocated for civil rights for blacks and refused to accept the status quo. On the floor of the House of Representatives, Powell delivered the following speech on June 23, 1953.

As we plunge deeper into the second half of the twentieth century, we find that not a single civil rights bill has passed the United States Congress under the leadership of the Republican or of the Democratic Party, except the provision which I was successful in inserting in the federal school lunch program. The hour has arrived to remedy this situation for the good of our country as a whole. Our nation is the least-liked nation in the world today, in Anglo-Saxon Europe and amongst the two billion peoples of the colored races of the rest of the world. We are least like (despite the billions that we have squandered under various aspects of the Marshall plan) for many reasons, but the major reason that I have found as, as result of many months of travel throughout the world, is that the world knows we are trying to get them to follow a kind of democracy that we are not practicing at home...President Eisenhower, clearly and repeatedly during his campaign, called for the abolition of segregation in the District of Columbia. When I attempted to follow his leadership, by introducing an amendment recently in this House, ONLY FIVE REPUBLICANS voted to follow their president!...One of the major reasons why the Republican Party cannot get top Negroes to take posts in Washington, D.C. is because they are refusing to come from their native cities and expose their children and their families to segregation in the schools and

---

elsewhere. We are trying to fight Communism with material, labeled "Jim Crow." We are trying to get the peoples of Asia and Africa, through our material aid, to follow our leadership, when that material is reaching their countries labeled, "MADE BY WHITE ONLY."... We think we are great and all-powerful because of our material possessions, scientific achievements, and industrial know-how but that which made America great and ever will make any nation, large or small, great is its moral and spiritual leadership.52

In the name of democracy, Powell constantly fought to enact civil rights legislation.53 Cone notes that "there is only one principle which guides the thinking and action of black theology: an unqualified commitment to the black community as that community seeks to define its existence in the light of God’s liberating work in the world."54 In the following speech, Powell illustrated his commitment to the black community as it relates to gaining equal rights. On October 11, 1955, Powell spoke at a labor rally and outlined a six point program of action to combat the recent wave of lynch murders in Mississippi. Powell asserted:

Having just come back fresh from Africa, Europe and England, I can objectively report that the lynch murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi was, in the eyes of Europe, a lynching of the Statute of Liberty. No single incident has caused as much damage to the prestige of the United States on foreign shores as what has happened in Mississippi. This is a thing we must face unless something is done by the legal forces of the United States to rectify the wrong in Mississippi, then our leadership is not only going to be seriously damaged, but it is going to continue to slide down hill. I believe some things can be done. In the first place, I have talked to the top lawyers of the NAACP and with Executive Secretary, Roy Wilkins, and they assure me that under the present law, it is as impossible for the federal government to do anything concerning murder within the State of

52 Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Civil Rights Speech Delivered on the Floor of the House of Representatives, June 23, 1953, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.


54 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 10.
Mississippi, as it would be for them to do something concerning a murder on 135 Street and 7th Avenue. But, nevertheless, there are specific things that can be done. In the second place, I need you to support me in demanding that there shall be convened immediately a special session of Congress...I say that the greatest danger facing us right now is the danger of adverse world opinion because of the Mississippi lynchings and, therefore, a session of Congress must be called the illness of Mr. Eisenhower must not be used as an excuse. In third place, words has come to me that most of the FBI agents working on the Mississippi incident are from the deep south, if not from Mississippi itself...I am, therefore, recommending that the FBI immediately send into Mississippi a fresh team of agents, most of them from the northern cities. I also would like to know, why the FBI has not employed Negro FBI agents in larger numbers. They should be down there in Mississippi with the full weight and authority of the United States government backing them up. In the fourth place, I believe that a national boycott of anything that comes from Mississippi should be organized by both Negroes and whites, including all groups, such as churches, trade unions and fraternities. Such a list of products could be drawn up by the NAACP. I place at the service of the NAACP, my ability to use the Congressional Record. I will print in that record any list furnished to me and under my frank will distribute that list all over the United States. In the meantime, the Negro people in Mississippi should immediately stop buying in the local stores and do as much purchasing as possible from Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward catalogues. In the fifth place, a fund should be set up under the auspices of the NAACP, to which church and trade union groups with large sums in their treasury, should contribute to establish something on the style of the old Underground Railroad during the pre-Civil War days. In the sixth place, when the next session of Congress opens in January 1957, I will present a resolution upon that day demanding that no one from the State of Mississippi shall be seated in the Congress, due to the fact that they have refused to allow the people of that State to vote...Finally, we need to realize that the vast majority of white people in America are shocked to their heart at what has happened in Mississippi, and the will work in cooperation with us. This no hour, therefore, to meet murder with hatred. This is an hour to use our minds, our hearts and our pocketbooks to stop this evil which, in reality, is not hurting the Negro as much as it is destroying the United States of America.\footnote{Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., “Congressman Powell Speaks at Labor Rally,” October 11, 1955, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.}

In the spring of 1957, blacks in the South experienced acts of violence such as
bombings and beatings. Despite the racial tension, the president took no action against these atrocities. Civil rights leaders implored the president to visit the South and to meet black and white leaders in an effort to remedy the situation. Nonetheless, Eisenhower denied their request. As a theologian, Powell aligned himself with the struggle for civil rights, and he rebelled against the racism that existed in the South. In relation to black theology, "blacks are encouraged to revolt against the structures of white social and political power by affirming blackness." On April 14, 1957, Powell addressed the arrested black clergymen in Atlanta, Georgia at a mass meeting of the Interdenominational Minister's Alliance of Atlanta.

American democracy sank to nadir on January 10, 1957 when Dr. William Holmes Borders along with five other clergymen were arrested in Georgia for justly exercising their rights as American citizens under the laws of our land. These men of God were obeying the law as handed down by the United States Supreme Court which outlawed segregation on buses and trains engaging in interstate commerce...Today the problem of civil rights is no longer sectional or racial. It is the problem of all American people because upon the basis of solving this problem and solving it quickly rests the entire future of the United States of America before the Congress of the nations of the earth. As Vice President Nixon learned on his recent trip to Africa, we are being judged not on the basis of our foreign policy statements along the banks of the Potomac, but on the basis of misdeeds of un-Americans in Atlanta, Georgia, Montgomery, Alabama, and wherever any citizens are abused, including Harlem, New York...The United States of America can automatically become a second-class power in tomorrow's world because the nations of the earth agreed at Bandung, again at Ghana, and repeatedly at the United Nations, that no nation will be a first-class Power in tomorrow's world that has second-class citizens...The final thing which no one can stop is the knowledge, even by our most bitter enemies, that our position is not only legal but it is moral. The greatest spiritual witness being given in

57 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 17.
America in this century is being given by men of God in Atlanta, Georgia; Birmingham, Alabama; Montgomery, Alabama; Tallahassee, Florida; and other communities throughout our nation. There is no power born that can stand up against the massive onslaught of men and women united through prayer, led by their clergy, and undergirded by the omnipotent majesty of God. The day that the southern white clergy begins to give the moral witness that the Negro clergy are now giving, that day will mark the complete and final end of Communism’s greatest weapon – segregation.58

In this speech, Powell insisted that racial injustice needed to be addressed from a national viewpoint to demonstrate that United States represented democracy. By using the clergy scenario in Georgia, he used this example to illustrate the clergy would be the leaders in the battle for morality in the United States.

In Cone’s view, “Justice is the structure necessary for the human expression of human freedom. To be God, God must protect both the freedom and the structure of human behavior.”59 In his activism, Powell empowered blacks to fight for their rights. On May 17, 1957, Powell delivered a speech before the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. at the nationwide Freedom March on Washington, D.C. and Prayer Pilgrimage. In his speech, he stated the following:

I begged my own party, the Democratic Party, directly through the National Chairman, Paul Butler, to speak out during its national meeting, May 5th. They absolutely refused to say one word concerning the bombings, outrages, persecutions, and present civil rights legislation now being considered by a Democratic Congress. Therefore, it is mandatory that we establish a “Third

58 Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., “Representative Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Addresses the Arrested Negro Clergymen in Atlanta,” April 14, 1957, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.

Force” – a force that will be non-partisan, but political; non-racial, but for the
time being, led by our Negro clergy who have given the greatest spiritual witness
of any group in this century; non-denominational, inviting men of all faiths to
follow. It must be housed only in the churches, led only by the clergy, powered
through prayer, and acted in unity. The NAACP is now being driven
underground. We can raise funds and channel those funds to the NAACP to
continue its monumental work. We shall use as our techniques based solely on
passive resistance, both nationally and locally, wherever the situation calls for
such action – work stoppages, economic boycotts, mass demonstrations, sit down
strikes, slow downs, picket lines, and political unity irrespective of party, but most
definitely by the individual candidates. Through this, we can turn the tide from
hypocrisy to honesty from flaunting the law to respect for the law. We will
welcome, and we will aid openly or through the underground, those white church
groups, Protestant, Catholic or Jewish, who are on our side – the right side – the
left side – the moral side. To this, I summons you, and to this, I am willing to
dedicate my all!60

In this speech, Powell became disenchanted with the Democratic Party’s noncommittal to
civil rights for black Americans. He suggested that a third political party should be
formed, which would consist of black clergy. Apparently, he expected black clergy to
assume the moral leadership role in advocating for civil rights for black Americans.
Black clergy would be able to establish the example of appropriate leadership for others
to follow in the fight for racial justice.

In Adam by Adam, Powell asserted, “I shall continue to devote my earnest efforts
to advance both the spirit as well as the fact of equality.”61 Cone mentions that “theology
by contrast cannot be separated from the community which it represents.”62 Many of

60 Ibid.
61 Powell, Jr., Adam by Adam, 100.
62 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 8.
Powell’s speeches were peppered with the tenets of black theology. Since Powell was militant in his approach to civil rights and to his activism, he regularly expressed the need for equality for individuals who were living on the margins in society. He wrote about his activism in the following letter to the utility club on June 15, 1957. Powell stated:

It was my pleasure while convalescing in my Washington residence to entertain the Rev. King and his staunch ally and supporter, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, prior to their visit to the Vice President of the United States. I trust that some of the advice that I gave them was helpful during that visit. It may come as a surprise to some of you to know – and Mr. King will I am sure if questioned agree, that it was appearance a few days prior to the historic Montgomery, Alabama boycott, in Montgomery, that helped in a small way to stimulate interest in a bus boycott. For it was when I appeared there that I outlined how successful our bus boycott had been in New York City years ago when we forced the Omnibus Corporation to hire qualified Negroes in all places of employment…Whether it is Mr. Randolph fighting on the labor front, Mr. Wilkins fighting on the freedom front, Mr. Marshall fighting in the Supreme Court. On December 5, they started the Montgomery Bus Boycott. It ended with the most successful massive resistance movement for civil rights that the South and this nation had ever witnessed.63

In this letter, Powell applauded the success of the participants of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Powell had established himself as a black leader and also a leader in advocating for racial equality. In many instances, Powell prided himself as being an advisor to other civil rights leaders as indicated in this letter. He felt it was necessary to combine his theology and his political ideologies in his work in social activism.

In his earlier speeches, Powell infused elements of black theology to motivate his audiences in achieving more equitable world. In February 1958, Powell delivered remarks at the Capital Press Club in Washington, D.C., which highlighted earlier

---

63 Powell, Jr., Adam by Adam, 125.
elements of black theology. In the following speech, he stated:

On May 11, 1955, Mr. Eisenhower ordered Mr. Maxwell Rabb, in my presence, to see that Negro men were used in the embassies in greater number than they are... Out of 12,000 employees in the State Department at home and abroad, only about 75 men and women of color have position of any significance. Cultural attaches can be appointed without any specific training or examination... 500 major cases came to my office during that year. Of this number, 39% represented cases involving discrimination and segregation in the armed forces. To be precise, 173 servicemen and women wrote to me from all over the world and the United States citing instances of segregation... Another instance is my fight to have the Defense Department assign men and women of color as attaches to embassies and consulates... As far as I have been able to ascertain, only one Negro has been assigned to an embassy and he is an Air Force commissioned officer to the Formosa China detail. There is no reason why commissioned and non-commissioned officers and enlisted men from the army, air force, and navy, cannot be assigned immediately as attaches in consulates and embassies. This is sheer discrimination. Another instance is the problem of colonialism in the Virgin Islands. I have been trying to get the Department of Interior and the White House to make a policy statement on the Virgin Islands. They have refused. The islanders are seething resentment. On one hand they have Puerto Rico with commonwealth status, on the other hand, they have are still in the rut of colonialism... I am forwarding to the White House today the petition sent to me by the people of the Virgin Islands in which they state they are going to petition the United Nations to investigate the United States for its denial of the right to vote to the Virgin Islanders. This is all the Communists need to give them propaganda before the world. Mr. Eisenhower said that he hopes color of skin will not enter the science education legislation. I wish to state most emphatically that color of skin must enter in. The United States has no choice. If we are going to make this a white man’s country, then we might as well accept second-class nationhood. I am going to present the Powell amendment from here on in... We are rapidly becoming a nation of fools. The world is becoming anti-white and the United States possesses the largest colored section of citizens of any western power. 64

64 Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Press release on Capital Press Club, February 6, 1958, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.
In this speech, Powell condemned the United States of not practicing democracy abroad. Particularly, he highlighted instances where the United States discriminated against black Americans in the military and in the foreign service. He also criticized the denial of the right to vote to the Virgin Islanders. In light of black theology, Powell used his political voice to advocate for the civil rights of people of color. Tirelessly, he fought to get equality for oppressed individuals.

Relative to black theology, Powell often preached from the scripture, “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32, KJV). The truth and freedom relate to God. Powell’s interest in freedom was supreme in his religious theology and in his political philosophy. On July 19, 1959, Powell delivered a speech at a mass rally of the NAACP in New York. He stated the following:

The South is progressing slowly but surely. The North is retrogressing not so slowly and just as surely. The time has arrived for the fighters for freedom and civil liberties, including the national office of the NAACP to start paying attention to the increasing discrimination and segregation in the North. Up to this point, most of our attention has been focused on the plight of our “poor southern brethren.” It is time now that we focus some of that attention on us poor northerners...In the first place, liberalism is sham and hypocrisy in the north today. There are not true liberals left...I am sick and tired of the NAACP and the Urban League being used as a screen by anti-Negro liberals to prove that they are not anti-Negro...As we turn our eyes northward, we must realize that if this is a NAACP, then there are in the United States today over a million new colored people to whom the NAACP should reach out its hands to help and to reach out its hands for their membership, and that is our new Puerto Rican element concentrated in New York, Chicago and Detroit but one third of who are colored...Let this also be known to the whole world even behind the Iron Curtain, that lynching is legal in the United States...I am sick and tired of hypocrisy – North and South, black and white. I am sick and tired of lynching being legal. I

---

65 Paris, 150-151.
am sick and tired of thirty odd Negroes being executed in Florida for rape and not a single white man. I am sick and tired of six Negro churches being bombed in Montgomery, Alabama, and nothing done until one synagogue is bombed in Atlanta, Georgia, and then the president, himself, ordered an investigation. I am sick and tired of the national leadership of this country believing, as reported in the press conference the other day that some segregation is ok. And I am sick and tired of Negro leaders who are selfish, jealous and modern Uncle Toms. This is an hour to centralize, channelize and focus our emotions...America is in danger and can only be saved today by the United Action of minority people.66

In this speech, Powell drew attention to racial discrimination in the North. He stated that northern blacks were also experiencing discrimination. Although the Civil Rights Movement concentrated mainly its efforts in southern states, black leaders and civil rights organizations needed to focus on the plight of northern blacks. He indicated that racial inequality was even more present in the North as in the South.

Powell was known for “fiery style of oratory with a disdain for vacillation.”67 The tenets of black theology are infused in Powell’s speeches. He spoke out against the injustices against the oppressed community. Cone points out that “black theology is Christian theology because it centers on Jesus Christ.”68 Clearly, Powell’s theology was centered on the gospel of Jesus, which he often incorporated in his speeches. In his sermons and his speeches, he reminded his audience that to have any significant changes required faith and work. He challenged them to develop new and innovative ways to

66 Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Speech delivered at the mass rally of the NAACP in New York, July 19, 1959, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.


68 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 5.
improve social conditions in the community. Powell used the following phrases in an effort to him close to the oppressed community, such as: “Keep the faith, baby; When you have black power you don’t need violence; and Keep on fighting.” Powell’s rhetoric was militant, which could not be ignored. He knew that he needed to be militant in speaking to demand changes for the oppressed. Therefore, Powell’s rhetoric was compatible with the tenets of black theology.

---


70 Rigsby, 280.

71 Ibid.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Before black theology was in vogue, Powell introduced various elements of this discipline. To understand Powell’s theology and social activism, an initial examination of his father, Powell, Sr. was explored. Powell, Sr. laid the foundation for a militant theology and social activism for his son. Powell followed in his father’s footsteps and expanded his theology and its impact on social activism locally as well as nationally. Unquestionably, black theology was reflected in Powell’s social activism. Essentially, black theology adds to the militancy of social activism. To become an effective activist, a certain level of militancy is required. Throughout his career, Powell demonstrated this level of theological militancy in his social and political activism.

During the end of Powell’s academic career at Colgate, he received a supernatural call to the ministry. He recalled:

On a particular night in February 1930, I’d worked late at my desk in my room in Andrews Hall on some papers for Doc Alton. It was two in the morning. I turned out the light, looked over the snow-clad golf course through the leaded-glass English casement window, with the moon shining in my face. Suddenly, there came a voice. Something like my father’s but softer, yet more insistent. A still, small voice. “Whom shall I send? Who will go for me?” And there in the quiet, for the first time in my life God talked to me.1

This spiritual epiphany gave Powell unwavering Christian faith and the confidence to become God’s spokesperson in an effort to promote morality in the world. He believed that God called him to fulfill a particular mission. A few years later, he told Harlemites that he would accept the call to become their spokesperson, “not through any wish of my own…but simply because I had been born to begin my work in the Great Depression.”

For the remainder of his life, he vowed that he would always listen for “the quiet, still voice,” and dedicate his life to preaching the “good news.”

Social Implications of Powell’s Theology

Powell subscribed to the tenets of black theology in his social activism. Early in his ministerial career, he engaged in various form of social activism. Powell became involved in local protests and became a fierce negotiator. He evolved into an activist minister who established food banks for Harlemites during the Great Depression.

During his the first years of his pastorate, significant changes occurred inside the church.

---


One of the most popular programs at Abyssinian was the prayer meetings on Friday nights. Powell introduced a series of talks on a variety of religious books to help modernize the ideas of the church relating to the Bible and Christianity.5

During the 1930s and 1940s, the effects of the Great Depression and World War II contributed to the struggles of African Americans, which entailed a myriad of problems, such as racial and economic issues. Abyssinian became their rock where they worshipped and became hopeful for the future. Powell declared that Abyssinian was “a church of old time spiritual power, of modern interpretation of the gospel and prophetic leadership for tomorrow’s world.”6 Speaking to Abyssinians, he announced that Abyssinian “stands as a citadel of truth, a bulwark of freedom, a bastion of integrated democracy and a beachhead for the Kingdom of God on earth.”7 Consequently, Abyssinians welcomed “new leadership, new organization, and new political and theological emphases.”8

Furthermore, Powell demonstrated his activism by the power of the pen. In 1936,


7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.
he began publishing a column, "The Soap Box," in the black weekly *Amsterdam News*.\(^9\)

Once Powell said, "Every human being has a right to protest. This is what I have been doing and why I am in the place that I am in today."\(^10\) He became involved in public protest when advocating for the rights of the Harlem physicians, which held a mass rally in their support. He gave speeches that galvanized the crowd to take action. He always practiced nonviolent protest in his social activism. He led boycotts and marches in New York to protest against many injustices against blacks. Through his protesting, he successfully helped blacks to attain their equal rights, particularly in employment situations. He worked with organizations to attain employment opportunities for blacks. Through organizing, he and his coworkers picketed the streets of Harlem demanding that white-owned stores employ blacks. He offered strategies for blacks to confront authorities to redefine justice.\(^11\) His leadership was honed by Abyssinian and was transformed from the pulpit into streets to fight for justice.\(^12\)

Powell differed from his father's conservatism on concerns of personal holiness; however, he admired his father's ideologies about pastoral authority, the social gospel,

---


\(^10\) Rigsby, 279.


and the responsibility of the church to fulfill God's kingdom on earth by promoting social, political, and economic justice. In addressing the issues of the time, African-American religious leaders faced "choosing between two world views...an ‘other worldly’ and a ‘this worldly’ faith." These leaders had to decide, "Is the Christian message one which asks man to submit patiently to the evils of this world secure in the knowledge that paradise awaits...or is it a message of reform – calculated to bring to mankind a society based on brother love?" For Powell, the choice for him was "this worldly" faith.

Moreover, Powell, Sr. contributed to the success of his son's ministry at Abyssinian. First, he assured the congregants that new leadership was capable and reminded them that church was bigger than any person. Second, he began another career in lecturing and writing books. Third, he offered his son profound advice at the start of his pastorate. He asserted the following:

Preach with all the power of your soul, body, and mind the old-time simple Gospel because it is a fountain for the unclean, food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, clothing for the naked; strength for the weak, a solace for the sorrowing, medicine for the sick and eternal life for the dying...Preach it until your tongue is

---


14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.
paralyzed in death and the son of God shall say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.”

Fourth, Powell inherited a well-organized and well-operated church from his father.

By 1941, while Harlem was still recovering from the Great Depression, Abyssinian was still providing services to the community. Powell believed that church’s operations needed to be closely monitored. Having a respect for Baptist polity,

Powell deemed pastoral authority virtually absolute. He was not alone in this interpretation of pastoral power. His point of view was typical among Baptists. In Atlanta, Georgia, at almost the same moment Martin Luther King, Sr., was making similar demands of the Ebenezer Baptist Church congregation and similarly re-organizing the church.

Abyssinians recognized that innovative and progressive ideas were needed to enhance the church and its fiscal responsibility. In 1941, Powell appointed a few members to head a committee to investigate forming a Consumer Cooperative. The committee described Harlem’s condition as astonishing. They reported that African

---


17 Ibid.


19 McNeil et. al., Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith, 173.
Americans faced acute employment discrimination.\textsuperscript{20} During this meeting, Abyssinians recommitted to “study and plan for the gradual emancipation of the people from all forms of proscription, whether social, economic or political.”\textsuperscript{21} The church’s ideology was “summed up in the Golden Rule.”\textsuperscript{22} Abyssinian reaffirmed the social gospel and the prophetic Christianity of the black church, which addressed the spiritual, political, social, and economic realities.\textsuperscript{23}

Powell decided to expand his social activism as a pastor into politics. When Powell was elected to the New York City Council in 1941, he chose the role of a political activist. In this role, he was able to hone his political and protest skills. During this period, he launched the \textit{People’s Voice}, a Harlem weekly, which allowed him to express various political opinions.\textsuperscript{24}

In 1944, Powell won a United States congressional seat becoming New York City’s first black congressman. He continued his work in activism by introducing a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission, advocating to eradicate the poll tax


\textsuperscript{21} McNeil et. al., \textit{Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith}, 173.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{24} Gates, Jr., and West, \textit{The African-American Century}, 180.
in federal elections, and fighting to abolish racial segregation in the armed forces. Being a black congressman, the rules of the United States House of Representative banned him from such facilities as steam baths, barbershops, and dining facilities. Consequently, he and his staff launched a campaign to desegregate these facilities. He fought to end the exclusion of black journalists from the House press gallery.25

In the early 1940s, he introduced the “Powell Amendment” to be attached to funding legislation.26 This amendment was supported by the NAACP in an effort to prevent federal funds to be used to support racial segregation.27 Powell attached the amendment to numerous bills until the passage of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.28 Notably, as chairman of the Education and Labor Committee, Powell was commended by President Johnson for his achievement. Johnson stated that “only with progressive leadership could so much be accomplished by one committee in such a short a time.”29 Powell’s committee was powerful, and its bills aimed at destroying segregation in the United States.

---


26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.


29 Rigsby, 277.
Continuously working on behalf of oppressed individuals, Powell demonstrated the use of black theology tenets in advocating for improved race relations. Having the power to deliver black votes, he “held national candidates’ feet to the fire over racial issues, and punishing fellow Democrats for their apparent weakness on civil rights.”

Diligently, advocating for underserved individuals, Powell helped to get legislation passed such as increasing the minimum wage, establishing Head Start, creating the Office of Economic Opportunity, and promoting a variety of social programs.

Powell’s political ideology made it simple to engage in a populist style with blacks, which was beneficial for black politics. Powell’s most crucial “weapons were his ability to articulate the grievances of the lower strata, and the oftentimes messianic flavor he gave to serving as a constant and caustic critic of the white political structure.”

Powell was archetypal of a certain kind of urban politician; however, he was victimized by “a pathological and self-destructive paradox.” His career was built upon the support of blacks, which was the foundation of his political success. In the 1930s, Powell entered into New York politics with a racialist political style. His attractive looks

---


31 Ibid.

32 Daniels, 134.

33 Ibid.
and defiant attitude portrayed an image of confidence and liberation, which blacks found incredibly interesting. Despite his independence, Powell was controlled to some degree by the “white power structure” although somewhat differently than most black politicians. He assumed that blacks should have access to the New York political system.34

Powell utilized his Christian experiences and theological training to attack civil rights opponents. For his adherents, he promoted a religious brand of ethical authority over white segregationists. Powell preached a message to blacks that made them feel worthy and confident. He used religion to get his followers to invest in his message.35

In regards to his personality, Powell was openly condemnatory of America’s racial problems. While serving in Congress, he continuously protested against inequality against blacks. His goal was to create discomfort among Americans as related to the discrepancy between belief and practice. His objective was not to be polite in dealing with race relations but to increase the discomfort level on this subject. He was abhorred by his adversaries and loved by his admirers. Subsequently, not only whites were his target, but if blacks disagreed with his ideology, he dismissed them with a charge of “Uncle Tomism.”36

34 Ibid., 116.
36 Ibid., 5.
Throughout his career, he positioned himself on the “militant” side of the racial protest movement. Many black leaders accepted Powell’s maverick leadership style. He was recognized for his appeal to many of his black constituents. Bayard Rustin summarized Powell’s appeal to blacks as daring do what other leaders failed to do. His social activism involved soul-stirring speeches, which were sprinkled with the principles of black theology. During the planning stages of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the black leaders called on Powell to assist them with the preparation of a nonviolent campaign to end segregation on buses in Montgomery. Black leaders, such as E.D. Nixon, were impressed with Powell’s tactics of nonviolent protest based on his boycott campaigns in New York.

In almost forty years of his career, Powell’s made significant accomplishments in civil rights. Powell was perceived as outspoken protester before going to Congress. Professor Charles V. Hamilton quotes political scientist John A. Davis as saying that “Powell’s willingness to defy authority began long before he challenged racial segregation and discrimination.” As a congressman, Powell was known as an irritant and had no intent to quietly play by the rules. He once told a reporter the following:

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., 481.

39 Powell, Adam by Adam: 125.

40 Hamilton, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography, 482.
All my life, an irritant. My father before me. It’s my heritage. Whenever a person keeps prodding, keeps them squirming...it serves a purpose. It may not in contemporary history look so good. But as the times roll on, future historians will say, they served a purpose.41

During his tenure as a congressman, Powell defended America’s record race relations at the Bandung Conference, advocated to desegregate government facilities, attacked the policy that excluded black journalists from the House press gallery, and introduced the controversial Powell Amendment. He eventually gained the reputation of “Mr. Civil Rights.”42 He often used his position as a liberal to expedite the slow legislative process on Capitol Hill. During the 1960s, Powell became one of the most influential politicians in America. His skills as a preacher and protester were unique and impeccable.43

Powell’s theology was strongly influenced by his father and by the church. It is apparent that his sermons and speeches resonated with the tenets of black theology. Powell practiced what he preached. He often said that it was Abyssinian that made him who he was. The African-American church and the African-American community were instrumental in the development of the theology of Powell. Before Cone coined the term “black theology,” many theologians believed that it was initially articulated by Powell in

41 Hamilton, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography, 482.
42 Ibid., 187.
43 Ibid., 483-484.
his spiritual and political rhetoric. Theologically, Powell believed that “God was absolute in all respects and did not reflect the image of humanity.” Powell believed that “the will of God as seen in the historical revelation of Jesus Christ is the true end of humanity and of history.”

Powell was not a traditional Christian theologian. He believed that an awareness of God was the only way to salvation. It was evident that Powell’s belief in God aligned with the principles of black theology. Since God did not reflect humanity, God would not be a cosigner on destroying humanity with evil. Powell was convinced that the absolute truth of God was the truth that made people free, and it was in opposition to those truths that held people in bondage. The struggle between liberating truth and unliberating truth characterized the journey of the spiritual individual from captivity to freedom. He asserted that “this is the eternal struggle of man against the unliberating truths that are self-evident, and toward the freedom-giving truths that must be agonizing sought after.”

In promoting his ministry, Powell established priorities on fundamental beliefs

---


45 Paris, 145.

46 Ibid., 235.

47 Ibid., 146-147.

about God and humankind. His beliefs included having a deep appreciation for the relationships among humans and between God and each human. Powell acknowledged that Christianity incorporated the observance of a horizontal and a vertical relationship with God. He believed that “a person has an individual journey with the divine, but equally important, Christians also have a walk with one another. The gospel is social and personal.”

In America, Powell believed that Christianity ruined God’s mission and the cause of democracy. He declared, “Next to our foreign policy, no institution in our American life is more hypocritical and therefore does more to hurt the cause of God and the cause of democracy than our so-called Christian church... or lack of Christianity.” He criticized the Christian church for embracing discrimination and racism. He proclaimed, “I say that any church that in any way preaches or practices anything that will exclude anyone from membership is negating the power of Christ.” Powell believed that the Christianity practiced in most white churches was godless and immoral. He expressed that “drawing near to God cannot be accomplished, nor even the initial steps taken, until


50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.
one has purged himself of all hatred.”

Abyssinian was a praying church. The pastor and his members believed their prayers would make a difference in the world, particularly focusing on peoples’ conditions around the world. Powell advocated the fundamental stance of Abyssinian: “We have pinned our faith on international policies. But the most intelligent and farseeing international policies, unless God is in the midst of them, are worthless.”

Often, Powell preached that “religion was always a profound and powerful experience between the spirit of humanity and the absolute Spirit which rule the universe.”

Powell relied on God’s guiding spirit in his engagement in international relations and politics. Frequently, Powell spoke to his members about democracy and Christianity as well as how they could be effective tools for human betterment.

---


Abyssinians advocated for a more genuine Christianity and a truer democracy that would benefit humanity. Because of his international experiences, Powell urged his members to help to restore the nation’s reputation worldwide. He once warned that there is a “concerted action to expedite the nation’s integration program... We will wake up one day and find that the whole world has built a wall around us and reduced us to a second-class power.”

The will of God was normative for history and insisted that it was discernible in all experience in all experiences of beauty, goodness, peace, and kinship. That norm liberates, because it sets humans free from all forms of conformism and enables them to speak the truth and to act for the sake of God’s will regardless of the consequences. God’s absolute will as the norm for history gave Powell a radical principle of criticism of history. By employing it, he was able to see the possibilities and limitations inherent in all things, including the U.S. Constitution, the American way of life, the Civil Rights Movement, the black radical movements, and communism... A radical affirmation of the will of God as normative for humanity was, for him, the basis of freedom and the ultimate ground of his loyalties.

His belief in the American dream was in his thoughts where the political vision of the nation was viewed as being in alignment with God’s will. He thought that “when humans use their power to destroy the moral and spiritual powers of their kinspeople, they thwart the will of God, and their actions will lead inevitably to self-destruction... He was convinced that it was the responsibility of people of conscience to use whatever

---


57 Paris, 236.
means possible short of violence to correct social injustices."58

He viewed racism as a democratic dilemma that would hinder the welfare of the nation. He considered politics as being religiously important and was a matter of morality. He believed that the moral norm was provided by God. Politics served that moral norm. He regarded "the relativities of the human condition to be used well only insofar as they aimed at the realization of the will of God in history."59

Powell viewed humanity’s end as provided by God but viewed political principles as constructed by humans. He did not regard matters of politics to be religious, but he thought that politics should be exercised for the benefit of humanity. Powell rarely felt the need to justify his political philosophy by demands to theological categories.60

Before Martin Luther King, Jr., Powell was the most influential activist pastor in America. According to Cone, black theology emerged from the black church that “has always been involved in the historical fight for justice.”61 Cone mentions that “before King, no Christian theologian showed so conclusively in his actions and words the great contradiction between racial segregation and the gospel of Jesus.”62 In disagreement, Cone should consider Powell as a Christian theologian prior to King as being a

58 Ibid., 237.
59 Ibid., 238.
60 Ibid.
61 Cone, Risks of Faith, 45.
62 Ibid., xvii.
theologian who fought against segregation in applying black theology precepts. Powell paved the path for King and other black theologians who subscribed to black theology.

Powell was one of a kind. Some might say that he was one of the most controversial figures in history or some might simply say he was a man who was on a mission. He certainly had his faults, but he also had a love for people. Some people appreciated Powell’s outspokenness as well as his defiant nature at times. Some individuals believed these traits resonated the tenets of black theology and were necessary to produce positive results that were needed for Powell to fight for justice for oppressed individuals. In reviewing how black theology impacted Powell’s activism, the following statement sums it up best.

Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., was many things to many cadres of publics. He was Mr. Civil Rights to those who loved him in Harlem; he voiced the fears, concerns, and demands of African Americans throughout America; he championed causes and pushed for reforms in areas such as labor, health, and education; he was the outspoken, radical, and agitating senior pastor to congregants at Abyssinian Baptist Church; he was a supporter of the young militancy of the 1960s and a foe to those who might oppose such a position; and he was the flamboyant, outspoken, and defiant congressional representative from Harlem.63

Early in his life, he served as one of the most prominent preachers at Abyssinian Baptist Church. Church members gave him the name, the “Flamin’ Tongue.”64 As a minister and militant activist, Powell made appeals for racial pride, and his “social

63 Rigsby, 281.

activism held them spellbound.”  Today, tourists visit the church to get a sense of how Powell used the pulpit to transform Harlem into a better community.

Powell’s legacy of activism continues today at Abyssinian Baptist Church. On November 12, 1989, Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts was installed as the senior pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church. Under the spiritual leadership of Butts, the church’s mission continues to stay true to the tenets of black theology, which includes “transformed lives and a transformed community.” Butts charges the church to fulfill its mission of salvation with the belief that “there is no separation between the church and the community: the future of the church and the future of the community ought to be seen as one and the same.”

In keeping with tradition, Butts continues to implement the following: communicating the gospel in an inclusive way and continuing Christian outreach to the community; affirming stewardship as owing all to God; interconnecting ministry holistically; and embracing an objective of Powell, Sr. to give African Americans “a

---

65 Ibid.

66 McNeil et. al., Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith, 289.


68 Ibid.
model church.”69 Butts encourages Abyssinians to have a comprehensive vision by “bringing more souls to God through Christ” by becoming a “Christian Center for Human Transformation and Global Ministry.”70 Abyssinians are charged to serve the community by promoting physical and spiritual development.71

In his preaching, Butts also subscribes to black theology, especially when he explains the efficacy of salvation to his congregants. Constantly, he highlights the following:

Jesus atonement for our sins – His sacrifice, crucifixion, and death – provided absolute pardon and full redemption. The resurrection, God’s raising of Jesus, meant everlasting life for each believer’s soul. Life, not death had the ultimate victory. Second, he called upon believers to live responsibly within the spiritual liberation of salvation, a salvation from sin through the practice of a disciplined life and walking by faith. Liberation constituted part of the meaning of both the gift and the person challenge of salvation to see the example of Christ, hear the commandments of Christ, and choose a Christ-like life.72

Respectively, Powell demanded racial equality for Harlemites and overall for African Americans, which became an essential element of the Abyssinian’s tradition.

---


70 McNeil et. al., Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith, 293.

71 Ibid.

Following Powell's legacy, Butts is an advocate for social justice for New Yorkers.

During the early years of his pastorate, he became involved in civic affairs, such as serving as president of the Protestant Council of Churches in New York, vice chairperson of the United Way, member of the board of the black Leadership Commission on AIDS, and chairperson of the Harlem YMCA.73

In subscribing to black theology, Butts believes that the African-American church should be a prophetic witness. Along with scholar Cornel West and fellow theologians, such Gardner C. Taylor, William Augustus Jones, Wyatt Tee Walker, Johnny Ray Youngblood, Timothy Mitchell, Herbert Daughtry, and Lucius Walker, Butts believes that the church's role is to offer "what one should hope for, and how one ought to act."74

Butts endorses public proclamation and activism as key components of prophetic Christianity.75

Today, the various ministries at Abyssinian continue to serve the community.

---


Abyssinian continues its tradition of feeding the hungry and annually distributes food baskets during the holiday season. Abyssinian also distributes food baskets to needy families in the community, such as to individuals living at the Abyssinian Towers and the Abyssinian House. Moreover, the church sponsors a food pantry, which is the “mission of the Utility Ministry...to provide food for the pantry by soliciting and/or bringing in donations, and exploring community partnerships (supermarkets) for food donations.”

Before Christmas, the church generally hosts the “Miracle on 138th Street” and “The Feeding of 5,000.” This event provides “nearly 175 tons of food to 5,000 Harlem families and other city residents.”

Abyssinian’s Health Ministry promotes a healthy congregation and community. The ministry supports “the physical and psychological well-being of the church and community by providing workshops on nutrition, fitness, specific medical conditions and understanding the health care system.” The ministry encourages the congregants to participate in blood drives. It sponsors health fairs, health screenings, exercise classes, and a variety of other health seminars. In addition, other church ministries collaborate in

---

76 McNeil et. al., Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith, 387.

77 Ibid., 388.

hosting seminars in promoting good health and preventing diseases.  

Abyssinian continues to mentor and nurture its youth. The Youth Council helps to groom the youth of the church to become responsible adults. The Scholarship Ministry awards the church’s youth full or partial scholarships. On Friday evenings, Friday Night FLAYVA, a youth worship services, hosts services that are “designed to deliver the gospel message...in a format that embraced hip hop culture without infringing on the truth of the Bible.” The worship service is designed “in a style that is conducive to attracting young men and women who have never been to church, who may not own a suit or a pair of pumps.” In 2005, HYPE was introduced as a forum for young people to discuss issues that they encounter as youth. In 1994, the Blue Nile Passage was founded. This program involved “young men...removed from the community by elders and initiated into those aspects of adult manhood, which [was] designed to enable them to live healthy, productive and responsible lives.” The church sponsors Youth On The


82 Ibid.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid., 325.
Move (YOTM), which is an after-school program that also offers Saturday tutorial sessions.85

Additionally, the church sponsors the Institute for Christian Education, which offers courses on subjects of faith, family, financial management, and biblical training. The Women's Ministry continues to engage in community service work in the church and across the city, such as hosting self-empowerment seminars.86 In 1989, the Abyssinian Development Corporation was established. Its mission includes the following goals: “increase the availability of quality housing to people of diverse incomes; enhance the delivery of social services, particularly to the homeless and the elderly; foster economic revitalization; enhance the educational and developmental opportunities for youth; and build community capacity.”87

In 2005, Butts introduced a “blueprint for positive change” which was focused on the purpose of “further development and effectiveness of...ministries.”88 In his plan, he proposed to focus more on the Christian education of the youth. He emphasized additional training for the church’s Sunday school teachers, ministerial teachers, officers,

85 Ibid., 397.

86 Ibid., 403-404.


88 McNeil et al., Witness: Two Hundred Years of African-American Faith, 361.
and leaders. He recommended that attention be placed on its international and home mission ministry. Butts’ blueprint proved to be successful in planning for the growth of the church.  

In 2007, Abyssinian continued its “Planning for Growth” process, Butts encouraged the engagement of Abyssinians in the life of the church in the following ways:

1. “stepping out on faith, to…walk by faith, not by sight [and] to act with more determination and diligence to gain more souls for the cause of Christ”; especially appreciating in 2007 Hebrews 11:1 (NIV), “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see”;
2. ”giving ‘exceedingly’ by devoting more…time and talent to various works of this ministry”; and

Notably, in the words of Professor Cornel West, “Black America is inconceivable without Harlem. And Harlem is unthinkable without Abyssinian Baptist Church. Just as Harlem is the cultural capital of black America, so Abyssinian Baptist Church is the spiritual center of Harlem.”  

Abyssinian continues its social activism under the leadership of Butts. Abyssinian continues to plan for growth and ensures that its mission reflects the church’s commitment to community transformation and improving the quality

---

89 Ibid., 361-363.


of life for all individuals, especially “the least of these” in Central Harlem. Its members exhibit a commit to Christ and to Christian service. Moreover, Abyssinians “look to their pastor and church for words of faith, hope, encouragement, comfort, and practical witness.” In the tradition of the church, the elements of black theology resonate throughout the current pastor’s message of hope and service, which is directed to the oppressed community.

Black theology is still very relevant today. David L. Moody argues that Christian rappers are interpreting the impact of social issues in similarity with the sermons of black liberation theologians in his dissertation, Political Melodies in the Pews?: Is Black Christian Rap the New Voice of Black Liberation Theology? He asserts that Christian hip hop ministries is becoming a vehicle in spreading the liberating theological messages among youth within the African-American community. Moody states:

Black Christian rappers (which some scholars consider rap nationalists) are the latest in a long procession of African Americans to participate in a “redeemer exercise” dedicated to the safeguarding of ethnic-gender hierarchies. Similar to the social and psychological needs of slaves that were revealed in the old Negro spirituals during the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries, Christian rappers and black liberation theologians, use a personified — social form of politics to convey meaning and substance to past and present racial intimidation in America.

---

92 Ibid., 426.
93 Ibid., 338.
95 Ibid., 3.
Christian rappers emphasize the impact that liberation has on social and religious issues. Moody indicates that “Christian rappers and black liberation theologians, use a personified-social form of politics to convey meaning and substance to past and present racial intimidation in America.”96 In their music, black Christian rappers translate the impact of economic, political and social transformations in comparison to the soul-stirring sermons delivered by black liberation theologians. In addition, the intent of their music is to empower and to promote liberation similar to theologians who subscribe to black theology.97

Theologian Delores S. Williams states that Cone’s A Black Theology of Liberation helped black theologians to “reconcile their own black experience of Jesus in the black Christian community with the Jesus they met in Eurocentric theological education.”98 Williams asserts that Cone’s black theology is as relevant today as it was when he wrote it. From a black woman theologian’s perspective, she admits that Cone’s work supports the African-American woman’s theological position. She indicates that Cone’s work is an historical hallmark in Christian theology. It is a theology that is tailored to the black experience in America. She believes that his work is applicable to

96 Ibid., 3.
97 Ibid.
black women’s struggle for justice.\textsuperscript{99} Lastly, Williams believes that white racial oppression still exists in America today. This oppression continues in black economic underdevelopment, inadequate unemployment opportunities, incarceration of young blacks, and other atrocities against blacks. She argues that “the mounting white violence against black Americans...is causing many black people to begin to lose faith in the efficacy of Martin Luther King’s nonviolent strategies.”\textsuperscript{100} Effective strategies are being considered with the theme of “liberation by whatever means necessary.” Obviously, Cone’s black theology continues to be relevant in creating liberation strategies for the oppressed.\textsuperscript{101}

Before black theology was introduced by Cone, Powell was using his social activism in helping the oppressed, and his work was black theology in action. As a theologian, he related Christ’s suffering to the suffering of the oppressed. He used his skills to motivate African Americans to achieve their full citizen rights in America. As a preacher, politician and activist, Powell motivated people to break racial barriers and not to settle for complacency. Consistently, Powell agitated against racial injustice on behalf of African Americans.

It is necessary for a theologian to have passion to serve others. From a black theological perspective, Powell had passion and vision in helping oppressed individuals.

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 192.

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 194.

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
For Powell, his father, and preachers like Gardner C. Taylor and Reverdy Ransom, their ministries offered a message infused with black theology. They were social activist ministers that helped their communities. By providing such services to the oppressed community, these theologians knew that oppressed individuals would be able to improve their conditions. In a nutshell, this type of ministry is black theology. Powell was able to relate Jesus' suffering to the oppressed. He believed that Jesus suffered and died to set humanity free. Because of his outspokenness on social issues, African Americans needed him as their spokesperson, particularly during the Jim Crow era.

Black theology can serve as a blueprint for today's theologians in honing their social activism skills. Like Powell and his father, both served their community by providing services to the poor, to the homeless, and to the unemployed. Father and son fought passionately against racism and for the rights of African Americans. By looking to Powell as an exemplar of a social change, theologians can apply the precepts of black theology to change their community and the nation.

In September 2011, as I stood on the steps of the Bunny Cottage in Martha's Vineyard, I tried to envision who was the real Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Despite his flaws, my first thought was that this man was remarkable. He was a trailblazer. He lived a life that some of us only dreamed about living. Mostly, he spoke the truth, and whether you agreed with him or not, it was the truth. Without a doubt, Powell was ahead of his time, and most definitely, he was the father of black theology.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


**Theses and Dissertations**


**Articles**


Newspapers


**Documentaries**

Sermons, Speeches and Correspondence

Holt, Ruth. A Statement by the Abyssinian Women for Powell, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.

King, Jr., Martin Luther. Telegram to Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., January 11, 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr., Collection, Robert Woodruff Library Archives, Atlanta University Center.

King, Jr., Martin Luther. Letter to Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., January 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., Collection, Robert Woodruff Library Archives, Atlanta University Center.

Powell, Jr., Adam Clayton. Letter to Constituents from Adam Clayton Powell, July 1954, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.

Powell, Jr., Adam Clayton. Congressional Letter with attachment Radio Broadcast of Representative Adam C. Powell, Station WMCA, November 5, 1950, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.

Powell, Jr., Adam C. Congressional Letter from Adam Powell in 1956, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.


Powell, Jr., Adam Clayton. “Revolt in the Pew,” Sermon, August 6, 1939, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Archives and Manuscripts.


Powell, Jr., Adam Clayton. Madison Square Garden Speech, June 7, 1943, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.


Powell, Jr., Adam Clayton. Civil Rights Speech Delivered on the Floor of the House of Representatives, June 23, 1953, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.

Powell, Jr., Adam Clayton. Testimony of Representative Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. before the United States Senate Subcommittee on Fair Employment Practice Bill, February 23, 1954, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.

Powell, Jr., Adam Clayton. Letter to President Eisenhower on Moral of Negro GIs in Europe, August 5, 1954, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.


Powell, Jr., Adam Clayton. Speech delivered behind the Iron Curtain, August 31, 1955, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.


Powell, Jr., Adam Clayton. Press release on the visit of Haile Selassie, the Emperor of Ethiopia at Abyssinian Baptist Church, “Remarks by the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Minister of the Abyssinian Baptist Church,” Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.

Powell, Jr., Adam Clayton. Congressional letter, 1956, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.

Powell, Adam Clayton. “Why This Democrat is for President Eisenhower.” August 12, 1956, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.

Powell, Jr., Adam Clayton. Press release on “Representative Adam Clayton Powell Addresses the Arrested Negro Clergymen in Atlanta, Georgia at the Mass Meeting of the Interdenominational Minister’s Alliance of Atlanta at the Wheat Street Baptist Church,” April 14, 1957, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.

Powell, Jr., Adam Clayton. Press release on “Race Relations” by Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., February 12, 1958, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.


Powell, Jr., Adam Clayton. Speech delivered at the mass rally of the NAACP in New York, July 19, 1959, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.


Powell, Sr., Adam Clayton. “What Has the Church Done for the Negro and What Will the Negro Do for the Church?” Sermon, April 1936, Abyssinian Baptist Church Archives.
