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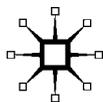
Bible Witness in Black Churches
By Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher

The Tragic Vision of African American Religion
By Matthew V. Johnson

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BIBLE WITNESS IN BLACK CHURCHES

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Preface

My basic self-naming is that I am a “Christian.” That means that I identify myself with those basic and fundamental theological affirmations of following God through the grace and love of Jesus of Nazareth known as Jesus Christ. Jesus is “Christ” for me in: the positive affirmation of believing that Jesus of Nazareth lived a full life in liberating, prophetic witness, and service to Yahweh. I believe that He died in a Crucifixion on a crude instrument of Roman torture known as “the Cross.” That “on the third day” He arose from death to eternal life in the uniquely Christian assertion that death itself could not conquer the divine life-force within Jesus. That this same Jesus “ascended to Heaven” and sits on God’s “right hand.” That Jesus will return in what Christians refer to as “the Second Coming.” I believe in the ongoing presence of Jesus Christ through the gift of God known as the Holy Spirit. I believe that Christians witness to all the above in a community known as the Church. Such a belief echoes the basic theological themes of the Nicene Creed, with the evangelical interest in emphasizing the signal importance of a personal loving encounter between the individual soul with Jesus Christ. As such I consider myself to be “orthodox,” and in the broad “center” of various Christian affirmations.

I am also a “Black Liberation Theologian.” That is to say, as an African/Jamaican American; I write theology from a self-consciously “black” perspective. As a “black” person I cannot help but do my theology from the increasingly complex and conflict-ridden social location that accompany being “black.” Yet my perspective of blackness ought to be seen as a barrier to understanding, or a hopelessly parochial stance. That is to say, as well, that I am inviting all readers (perhaps especially persons of other ethnicities and cultures) to look at the Bible and theology from the perspective of an African/Jamaican. Such a perspective uplifts the messages of Jesus as consonant with a “liberation” perspective. Further, having espoused such a stance, I dare to

demand social justice and legal-economic-political action commensurate with liberation for all people—especially those fighting: racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and able-ism.

Finally, I write from the perspective of being a physically challenged American. Although I can stand and take a few steps, I am profoundly dependent on a wheelchair. Such a dependency compels me to look at the world through the eyes of a “half” person, with most adults being taller than I am taken from the perspective of riding a wheelchair. When I am in a crowd of individuals, I am swallowed up. Further, as I wheel myself around, I find barriers to my access in sidewalks, improperly constructed “handicapped” ramps, and most irritatingly, doors. At the same time I realize that the United States of America is far advanced in its progress toward making accessibility for all those who are handicapped (mentally and physically) in comparison to most other countries. I cannot visit Nigeria, though it has been my fondest desire. My wife informed me, after returning from a conference there that even Korea is not set up to be “handicap-friendly.”

Writing a book about the Bible in relationship to any kind of theology is a risky business. It is fraught with the ironies of having a limited knowledge of biblical languages, and yet wanting to make some important points based on those original languages. As a trained ethicist I found myself just wishing that I could write about biblical ethics and be done with it. But the project called me to do more. As it is I find myself still wanting to put some more original language “meat” on the table.

I am not a trained historical-critic; but I am trained in theology and ethics. My approach in *Bible Witness in Black Churches* is based on what has been described by Stephen L. Harris as literary criticism.¹ Such an approach seeks to tease out theological and ethical themes present in the text, not the kind of tracing and analysis of pertinent, prewritten oral traditions, redactions, and pericopes used by historical critics. I try to use some historical-critical insights where appropriate, but my knowledge in that field is limited.

So do I have something to say? Yes. It is a burning desire to see the fires of intense study of the Bible to be inwardly integrated into the theological and ethical task of Black Theology. It is an inward fire that I have come to by having a personal experience of the presence of the Holy Spirit that could be called “the baptism of the Holy Spirit.” Such an experience has also been called “Pentecostal.” I share that experience with my Pentecostal brothers and sisters, yet I do not share the commonly right-wing political presuppositions of such churches.

Politically I sit in that broad center known as being a “moderate.” I agree with the personal and “conservative family values” shared widely in Republican circles, yet shy away from the kind of divisive “single-issue” politics practiced by Republicans. I embrace the wide range of social justice imperatives, environmental and ecological concerns; and liberal attitudes toward gender and cultural differences that Democrats espouse. As a result, I tend to vote Democrat more than Republican, but am not adverse to choosing various individual conservative politicians.

One cannot write a book alone. First I give honor to pastors in my life. Those include the late Emil Brunner, former pastor of Macedonia Baptist Church, Dallas Texas. I learned from Rev. Brunner that one cannot leave an encounter with the Bible as the living Word of God the same as one was before such an encounter. Rev. Tyrone Gordon of St. Luke’s “Community” Methodist Church in Dallas helped to provide excellent pastoral and worship leadership in my life. Pastor Gordon’s gift as the head leader in worship involves his enormous skills both of singing and preaching. Former pastor of St. Luke, Zan Holmes has served an inspiration to this work. Pastor Holmes’ complete commitment to the advancement of the poor, as well as his social justice leadership has pointed me in one of the primary directions taken in this book. Finally, Pastor Gerald Brooks of Grace Outreach Center in Plano invites me to grow every Sunday in his thought-provoking, soul-changing sermons. Always seeking to grow, Pastor Brooks challenges his congregation to grow with him in knowledge of the Bible.

I thank my colleague Theo Walker for his patient early reading of this text. His pointed questions had me refocus and clarify this book’s purpose. I also thank Catherine Keller for her extensive and sensitive criticism of the final text, something that helped me to make final adjustments. I thank Dwight Hopkins for his friendship, feedback, and encouragement about this project as being worthy of publication. Dwight’s wife Linda Thomas is an important conversation partner and a valued friend.

I thank all of my students whose insights have informed and shaped how I present the text as an aid to teaching. These students include all those taking various Bible courses, including Survey of the Bible, Survey of the New Testament, Survey of the Old Testament, and Biblical Theology.

Finally, and most important, I thank my beloved wife, Karen Baker-Fletcher, for always pushing me to do better and be better. A well-known, and highly respected theologian herself, Karen has never

looked at me in a condescending manner. Our mutual love and her belief in me are truly the most outstanding features of our relationship. We have been blessed with three children: Kristen (21); Kenneth (16), and Desiree (13) have been incredibly patient with their father as he dove into long sessions of concentration necessary to write the book.