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Race, Theological Education and Churches of Christ

KAVIAN McMILLON

The reality of a dichotomized fellowship along racial lines in Churches of Christ is beyond debate. The Stone-Campbell tradition and Restoration history is saturated with the stains of racism, tribalism and the like. And although isolated pockets of genuine fellowship exist between predominantly African American churches and predominantly Caucasian churches, as well as within “mixed” congregations, unity among the Churches of Christ on the whole is illusory and nominal at best. The unfortunate reality is that both black churches and white churches have been coexisting under the household name “Church of Christ” while ignoring the proverbial elephant of racial division in the room. Although discourse on the subject of racial division in the church came to a head at the tail end of the civil rights movement, the churches seem to have been content to go their separate ways throughout the past several decades. According to Douglas A. Foster, there has been an angry peace between African American and Caucasian Churches of Christ since the late sixties.¹

The factors contributing to the racial division among Churches of Christ are complex. Historically, many ideological, social and cultural differences perpetuated the divide. By comparison, theological and doctrinal differences were relatively minor. However, in recent years, such differences have increased dramatically. One reason for these differences has to do with theological training. Prominent African American and Caucasian leaders have disagreed on the nature of quality theological training and the role that it has played in doctrinal disparities between the two fellowships.² But although what exactly constitutes good theological training is debatable, there is no doubt that theological education has played a tremendous role in shaping the nature of Churches of Christ in recent years. And though racial division among Churches of Christ remains complex, the nature and direction of higher education in biblical studies has laid the foundation for the nature and direction of many congregations of the Churches of Christ.

Yet the implications of racial and cultural concerns in the realm of theological education have been largely underestimated, if not altogether ignored, among schools affiliated with Churches of Christ. And as we become aware of the increasing influence that the training of our ministers is having among our churches, we cannot afford to turn a blind eye to such matters if genuine racial unity among our churches is ever to be achieved. What is in order is a candid analysis that examines the racial disparities between the enrolled student bodies of Church of Christ affiliated ministry programs and the demographic makeup of our fellowship, as well as a look at the cultural inclusiveness of our theological curricula themselves. Such a comprehensive project is obviously beyond the scope of this brief article. My task is to communicate the

1. Douglas A. Foster, “An Angry Peace,” ACU Today, <http://www.acu.edu/alumni/acu-today/spring2000/cover02.html> (accessed June 2008).

2. See Jack Evans Sr, “‘Undoing Racism’ A Doctrinal Change-Agent Ploy,” <http://www.jackevansonline.com/Undoing%20Racism.htm> (accessed October 2006).

relationship between scholarship (theological education)³ and ministry as it pertains to the African American Church of Christ heritage specifically. Theological education will not only be instrumental in making unity between the Churches of Christ possible, it will be essential for the viability of the African American part of the tradition.

Despite the various ways that theological education naturally complements ministry, the two are often in tension with one another in the life of the church—and this tension certainly reveals itself in the context of the black Churches of Christ. The black church's resistance to scholarship impedes it from responding effectively to the crises it faces and allows space for the creation of new crises. Therefore, the goals of this reflection are: (1) to illustrate the tension between scholarship and ministry from a black perspective in the Stone-Campbell tradition, and (2) to demonstrate that scholarship (or theological education) is critical for the future of black congregations in light of its unique ministry context in the body of Christ.

SCHOLARSHIP AND MINISTRY FROM A BLACK PERSPECTIVE

A level of tension between theological education and ministry has always existed in the history of Churches of Christ. One reason for the resistance to scholarship is due in part to a culture of anti-intellectualism, a trait that has pervaded many American religious traditions. Although the Stone-Campbell tradition strongly advocated Christian higher education throughout its history, ordinary church members often viewed the discipline of theology with great distrust. However naive this suspicion, it is not wholly unwarranted. The Christian community has long observed seminaries graduating “spiritually and culturally malnourished trained pastors.”⁴ Helmut Thielicke's classic work, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, introduces new seminary students to valid concerns that church laypeople have about theological education.⁵ Countless numbers of seminary students either make a habit of preaching their doubts or end up losing their faith altogether. Others become puffed-up in their knowledge or look upon the church with contempt. Given the abundance of situations like these, the church has understandably been in tension with the *academic* pursuit of God.

Although suspicion toward a critical, scientific approach to God and scripture is understandable, anti-intellectualism represents a dangerous excess because it often refuses the benefits of scholarship. Theological education is faithful to the biblical directive to love the Lord with all of our minds. It is needed to give more depth to the ministry of the Word. We have inherited a faith nearly 2000 years after its birth and are informed by sacred texts written in ancient languages. Therefore, scholars are needed to help us “hear the biblical message as closely as possible as its original hearers and readers heard it.”⁶ Yet, anti-intellectualism is resistant to scholarship because it allows for evolution and change in the pursuit of truth. Change is a delicate matter for members of the Stone-Campbell tradition because of the notion that it has fully restored the one true faith. Many members of Churches of Christ view theology, and other scholarly endeavors, as a threat to the Christian faith. Some reject theological education because it challenges traditional norms which are often equated with sound doctrines.

Some members of black Churches of Christ in particular have been in tension with theological education not only because they perceive it as a threat to doctrine, but in some ways they also perceive it as a threat to black religious culture. The black church in general sometimes prefers anti-intellectualism to deliberative theology because the latter seems to devalue emotion and soulful expressions of worship.⁷ On some level, the black church has suspected that scholarly preachers cannot relate to the black experience or speak with

3. I use the terms “scholarship” and “theological education” somewhat interchangeably throughout because both get at the ideas of formal training and critical thinking, albeit each carries a slightly different nuance.

4. Kirk Byron Jones, “Reviving the Church-Seminary Partnership,” *The Christian Ministry* 28, no. 6 (November-December 1997): 19.

5. Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962).

6. Joel Stephen Williams, “The Ministry and Scholarship,” *Restoration Quarterly* 36 (1994): 176.

7. Jones, “Reviving the Church-Seminary Partnership,” 19.

dynamic passion. Irrelevance is a real danger in overly-academic preaching, but scholarship in itself does not reflect a loss of culture. The racist notion that blacks are intellectually inferior to whites underlies the fear that theological educational pursuits will diminish the blackness of one's spirituality. In essence, that notion asserts that the smarter one is the less black he or she is. Such an idea is often held subconsciously, and is symptomatic of the anti-intellectualism that has pervaded some portions of the African American community at large. As a result, some black churches have often tolerated lack of substance in preaching as long as the preacher was skilled in theatrics. While critiquing the anti-intellectualism pervading black churches, James H. Cone observed that, "it was as if the less one knew and the louder one shouted Jesus' name, the closer one was to God."⁸ As long as the church views black religious culture as incompatible with intellectual prowess, it will cultivate and perpetuate shallow faith. Thoughtful reflections upon God can and have been communicated with emotion, power and oratorical soul by black theologians such as Martin Luther King Jr. and countless others. Therefore, it is gravely erroneous to view theological education as a threat to black spirituality.

In fact, one of the many ways that scholarship is critical to the future of black Churches of Christ is that it will help preserve and celebrate black religious culture. It is because of scholarship that we understand the contributions that black spirituality has made to the community of faith and the world at large. If someone had not dedicated their efforts to identifying, analyzing and explaining the nature of the black spiritual tradition, its place in religion and spirituality would be unclear and few people could recognize its significance. For example, through scholarship we understand that Negro spirituals were not just work songs. In addition to functioning as a means of cryptic communication, they served as a vehicle for uneducated, oppressed slaves to engage in serious and coherent theological reflection. Yet, we should not only use scholarship to preserve the theological contributions of the past, but we should also use scholarship to contribute to the Christian community within the black church today. Modern theologians such as James H. Cone have made, and are making, the black voice heard in the Christian world. Such scholars have made masterful—albeit controversial—contributions, such as black liberation theology and other unique approaches to biblical interpretation. For too long, black Churches of Christ have not had their voices heard in significant dialogues of the Christian community. We either have not tried, or have been dismissed due to a lack of scholarly credibility. The black Stone-Campbell tradition offers much that ought to be preserved and celebrated, but this can only be done through the sacrifice of scholarly effort.

Not only can scholarship and theological education celebrate black spirituality, it can help build bridges between the black and the white fellowships of the Churches of Christ. Racial division has been an issue since the beginning of American Christianity, and has always been characteristic of the Stone-Campbell heritage. Yet, such division is incompatible with the ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel seeks to bring all people together in the unity of the Spirit by means of love and reconciliation. Although these are basic common-sense principles of the gospel, they have not always been realized in the life and history of the church. Education in itself has no power to work reconciliation. True reconciliation is the work of God. However, theological education can be a means by which God brings about reconciliation. Christian scholarship helps us identify problems and analyze issues. It assists us in sorting through the baggage which prevents us from fully incarnating the gospel. For example, scholarship has been instrumental in compiling the history of the Restoration Movement. This history reveals the extent to which the race issues in the church have reflected the race issues in society. It is also a window into the church's response to societal changes during the Civil War and subsequent eras. Because scholars have dedicated themselves to preserving our collective history, we are able to see where we came from. Knowing the road we have traveled allows us to understand more fully where we are. And naturally, having a clear vision of where we are allows us to determine how we should proceed toward reconciliation. Racial reconciliation will remain one of the most

8. James H. Cone, *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), xiii.

pressing challenges for Churches of Christ in the future. Therefore, anyone committed to ministry in black Churches of Christ should also be committed to working toward reconciliation in the greater fellowship, for it is at the heart of the gospel.

But reconciliation is much easier said than done. The gap dividing black and white Churches of Christ is increasing not only with respect to different spirituality styles, but as aforementioned, it is also increasing because of doctrinal and theological positions. Across the board, there have been dynamic changes in Churches of Christ in recent decades. However, changes have occurred much more rapidly and radically in white churches by comparison. Many churches have moved away from traditional forms of worship and have adopted more contemporary elements of worship such as praise teams and musical instruments. Furthermore, many in the Churches of Christ are calling for ecumenism and a more inclusive posture in the world at the expense of long-held traditional views. Changes such as these have led prominent leaders in black Churches of Christ to assert that an apostasy is occurring, one which is largely concentrated in white churches.⁹ Although differences of conviction will always exist, scholarship may be useful for creating dialogue and understanding among the fellowship of the Churches of Christ as a whole. However, both sides of the fellowship must be involved in order for any resolution to occur. That means white voices cannot be the only ones heard in scholarly discourse. Black theologians in Churches of Christ must be willing and able to participate in the conversation as well. Thus far, the black perspective has primarily been heard in reaction to and against the proposals of white leaders. In order for dialogue to be effective, the black voice must be a part of the ongoing conversation occurring in Churches of Christ. All voices should be heard in our churches and in our scholarship.

It is imperative that black Christians, in particular, pursue scholarly education and reflection so that we can navigate our own theological path. To put it bluntly, it is imperative for African Americans to think for themselves. In the Stone-Campbell tradition, blacks have a history of inheriting the theological traditions of whites. Many pioneering black preachers were trained by whites and then sent out to establish separate congregations for blacks. These preachers were supported by whites as long as they knew their place. Yet, God accomplished great exploits through pioneering black preachers in spite of white paternalism.¹⁰ However, paternalism and related practices can no longer be tolerated. This is not to imply that those black preachers blindly accepted teachings of white men. Many were brilliant independent thinkers. But blacks in the Stone-Campbell heritage have inherited a tradition that is heavily influenced by westernized, white American thought. Perhaps, if blacks had been able to fully participate in the collective theological formation of the movement, then at least race relations in the church might be different today. In contemporary times, the same danger exists for blacks in the Churches of Christ to adopt theologies that they had little participation in forming. Conversations and controversies seem to fall into the laps of black churches several years after they have already occurred in white Churches of Christ. Black theologians and scholars need to be involved in these conversations as they occur in the larger fellowship because we are fellow inheritors of the tradition. Due in part to a lack of teaching, many black members either know nothing of the Restoration Movement or deny its significance. But nonparticipation in scholarly discourse will only further isolate black congregations within the Churches of Christ. Black scholarship will prevent white brothers from thinking for us, as it were. It will allow us to make original contributions to the Christian community as we navigate our journey with God from our unique perspective and context.

9. Jack Evans Sr., "Undoing Racism: A Doctrinal Change-Agent Ploy," <http://www.jackevansonline.com/Undoing%20Racism.htm> (accessed October 2006).

10. Douglas A. Foster, "An Angry Peace," *ACU Today*, <http://www.acu.edu/alumni/acu-today/spring2000/cover02.html> (accessed October 2006).

SCHOLARSHIP AND SEEING GOD AT WORK IN OUR HISTORY

Scholarship is not only vital to navigate our own theological path, it will assist us in understanding how God has worked and is working in our history. Some members of the Churches of Christ minimize the significance that the Restoration Movement had in shaping their faith. They would prefer to identify directly with the origins of the first century church rather than acknowledge a recent developmental history. Many Christians perceive the latter as the work of human beings and the former as the work of God. Yet, we need not be a-historical in order to identify with Christ's church. When we apply scholarship to our history—in the form of serious theological reflection—we can see God at work. As Christians, we believe that God has been active in the history of his creation. However, many are wary of interpreting God's work in creation after the completion of the biblical texts. They often perceive this process as entirely subjective and going beyond the parameters of scripture. But Jesus' promise to be with us "even until the end of the age" (Matt 28.20) implies that he is still at work in the world through his people. Thus, we must have a means by which to identify his purpose and will for our past, present and future. Scholarship is not the only means of doing theological reflection, but it helps keep the church honest; and it helps keep the church thinking.¹¹ Deliberative theological reflection is required of African American Christian scholars and apt persons who are invested in the black Churches of Christ so that its history can be interpreted in connection with the eternal and divine purpose of God.

Christian scholarship will not only help us understand our history in light of God's purpose, it will help us preserve that history so that it can be told to new generations. Through scholarship we research, acquire, compile and synthesize information to bring about understanding and contribute to the collective knowledge base of humanity. If no one does the work to conduct this process with respect to the history of the African American Churches of Christ, then our stories will eventually be lost. Fortunately, some have already undertaken work of this kind. Edward Robinson has contributed to the collective history of Churches of Christ through the recent publication of several books such as *To Save My Race from Abuse: The Life of Samuel Robert Cassius* (2007);¹² *The Fight Is On In Texas: A History of African American Churches of Christ in the Lone Star State, 1865-2000* (2008);¹³ *To Lift Up My Race: The Essential Writings of Samuel Robert Cassius* (2008);¹⁴ and *A Godsend to His People: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Marshall Keeble* (2008).¹⁵ Moreover, the number of black professors of religion and theology is slowly increasing in schools affiliated with Churches of Christ. Though the ratio of African American professors to the population of the black Churches of Christ is still highly disproportionate, these scholars are contributing works that serve to add to the unique history of black Churches of Christ as well as the fellowship as a whole.

Theological education is not only important to the health and survival of black Churches of Christ, it is essential to the Christian mission as we participate in the kingdom of God. If we are seeking to incarnate the life of Christ in our contemporary context, we must seek to provide ministry and proclaim God's salvation to the poor, weak, downtrodden and disenfranchised members of our community. This is not always a simple task. Ministering amid the complex issues of the greater black community requires thoughtful analysis and serious theological reflection. For decades, the church has not reached black culture with the gospel adequately. Black Christians will continue to face crises of poverty, drugs, violence, the decline of spirituality and many other problems that plague black communities. A shallow "Jesus will fix it" attitude

11. Joel Stephen Williams, "The Ministry and Scholarship," *Restoration Quarterly* 36 (1994): 175.

12. Edward J. Robinson, *To Save My Race from Abuse: The Life of Samuel Robert Cassius* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007).

13. Edward J. Robinson, *The Fight Is on in Texas: A History of African American Churches of Christ in the Lone Star State, 1865-2000* (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2008).

14. Samuel Robert Cassius and Edward J. Robinson, *To Lift Up My Race: The Essential Writings of Samuel Robert Cassius* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2008).

15. Marshall Keeble and Edward J. Robinson, *A Godsend to His People: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Marshall Keeble*. (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2008).

is no longer acceptable. With the aid of the Holy Spirit, we must be able to identify, analyze and address the systemic and epidemic ills that affect our communities in light of the gospel of Jesus. Furthermore, theological education helps us to recognize that our ministry is not only about African American Churches of Christ, but that God's kingdom is universal. We must minister to all peoples and cultures of the world as best we can. We must transcend cultural stereotypes by employing the intellectual faculties that God has given us for the sake of others. Scholarship will help incorporate resources from the disciplines of economics, political science, sociology, philosophy, medicine and others in order to see the world with a more comprehensive lens.¹⁶ Scholarship cannot solve any problems; only God can. However, we can faithfully use theological education as a means of allowing God to reveal his will to us.

There will continue to be tension between scholarship and ministry in black Churches of Christ for years to come. However, I am hopeful that this conflict will be allayed as more African American men and women model scholarship in their own ministry contexts. Many remain skeptical of a scholar's ability to provide meaningful ministry because they have not recognized an example of one who did so effectively. But again, one exemplar of scholarship and ministry at its best is Martin Luther King Jr. Not only did his ministry change the entire world forever, he possessed one of the greatest minds in American history. Everything that he did to change the nature of this nation was backed by masterful coherent theology nurtured by theological education. King was everyone's theologian—because he fought for the liberation of all oppressed peoples—yet he was uniquely black and rooted in the black church. His legacy not only provides a model for integrating theological education and ministry, it exemplifies the incarnate faith of Jesus Christ. His example, as well as those of Edward Robinson and Jerry Taylor who serve Churches of Christ, inspire me as I embark upon theological education and endeavor into ministry within the African American Churches of Christ.

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16. Harriet Sider Bicksler, *Minding the Scholars: A View from the Pew* (Telford, PA: Pandora, 2002; Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2002), 231.