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Is there Hope?

The blog Jesusradicals recently published an article entitled, “Who Wants The Black Church Dead and Why?” by Rev. Dr. Heber Brown, III pastor of Pleasant Hope Baptist Church in Baltimore, MD. In response to Maya King’s article, “The Black church can engage more Black millennials by bringing politics back into the pulpit”, in his thoughtful approach, Brown’s article begins with a critical analysis of the statement “The Black Church is dead”. In which he probes through to get to the source of this announcement and finds “the message about the Black Church being dead and irrelevant gets amplified with the most passion, ink and air time?”, understanding this Brown asks the essential question: “Who Wants The Black Church Dead and Why?”

Brown not only identifies the importance of the Black church but also signifies how its influence attracts not only attacks from White Supremacy groups of the past in relation to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in 1963 but also present mass killings of Black Church goers like those associated with the 2015 violence in Charleston, South Carolina. Brown concludes “The greatest institutional threat to the system of White Supremacy is the Black Church.” By identifying the reasoning of this belief Brown goes further to explain, “The most important institutional characteristic, however, is that the Black Church enjoys the greatest degree of autonomy from White Control.” But to simply view the attacks on the Black Church merely because it is a institution that is exclusively governed by blacks and free of white rule would be rather naive and narrow. Or to say the Black Church merely provides a place to inspire, resource, and nurture strivings for Black Liberation and freedom for a black community, is simply not enough to want to utterly kill and destroy this institution that worships just as their attackers do Sunday after Sunday. But what is it about the Black Church that has it a target on its back? In this response I would like to push Brown’s ideology of the Black Church being viewed as only an institutional; but critically viewing the “Black Body” synonymously with the “Black Church” and if it is dead, viewing it as a physical bodily death.

For far too long White America has been killing the black body, incarcerating the black body, economically depriving the black body, socially excluding the black

body, sexually violating the black body, exploiting the black body, and politically manipulating the black body. It has been statically proven through Pew Research that the vast economic gathering in the black community is church driven. Most constituents are church attendees in the Black communities around the nation. So we already understand the economic value the black body holds but what is now fascinating is the body capital black voters hold when it comes to policy or public office.

So how can the system that is suppose to bring forth life, loose life herself. The black church dying is the vivid reality of the black body. From police brutality, mass incarceration, gun violence, and server mental and health issues the black body is in intensive care on life support fighting for its life.

Is there hope?

Spencer Macklin
MDiv Student

It's Not Just Racism

I read the article and found it very fascinating and have never really thought of the issue of the 'Death of the Black Church' and racism that way or their connection. I must admit though as a White, Catholic I have never had a lot of experience in a wholly Black Church. I grew up in Memphis/Mississippi area and many people I call and consider family are black and took me to Church. I certainly got a different feeling and vibe when attending and it was wonderful. I think we need more passion in our pastors and priests. These few experiences most definitely had an affect on me, but they were limited to a few. But after reading this article and also reading the article that might have sparked the response got me to thinking of my time in wholly Black Churches. There was that great passion for Christ and His works and His mystery but then a whole lot of 'leaven' to borrow from Jesus. It seems that social and economic issues were not of the importance in the churches in the way we learned about in school and the leadership of Dr. King and Malcolm X, and how the Church/Mosque was the driving force of these issues. The reason I wrote all of this and tried to explain myself, which I think I have a responsibility to do as an outsider who wants to and needs to engage in such topics, and say that the article is too easy. It is an out to simply pin it all on racism. Maybe that is not the entirety of the authors point but it certainly seems like it. I, of course, think that racism is a factor but it is hard to ignore that movements like Black Lives Matters and others not only didn't start with the Church but they actively distance themselves from it. Again, I can only understand and repeat what I have heard from my friends but more and more of my friends think that church is important but they believe their churches are no longer engaged in such issues as racism, social injustice, economic injustice, etc. They feel it is their personal responsibility. Maybe this doesn't mean the death of the Black Church and maybe it is a necessary change but change doesn't necessarily mean death and being unimaginative and unreflective doesn't help either. Engage, ask and grow in your worldviews and others.

God Bless

Verdell Wright
HUSD Alumni 2012

The Black Church is no longer relative to the lives of many Black people

I remember when Eddie Glaude first declared the Black Church's death. Black clergy took to the spoken and written word to refute him. To them, suggesting that the Black Church had died while they were still pumping through its veins was a slap in the face, an infraction waged against the effort they exerted to keep her alive and well.

Howard University student Maya King wrote an article entitled *The Black Church Can Engage More Millennials By Bringing Politics Back Into The Pulpit*. In it, she demonstrated a contrast between the Black Church of the Civil Rights Era and the Black Church of today. She included the responses of an activist and two Black Church leaders. She discussed the utility, sacred history, and vibrancy of the Black Church while acknowledging times have changed. Here is the last sentence of King's piece: "Black Americans must first acknowledge that the Black church as we once knew it—as the cornerstone of the community and civil rights—is effectively dead, and it is time to breathe new life into it."

Rev. Dr. Heber Brown provided a strong response to Maya King's piece by penning "Who Wants the Black Church Dead and Why?" He handles King's writing and Glaude's piece as similar in that they both label the church as dead. He writes, "It's a refrain echoed so often that it can make one wonder if it's being orchestrated or cleverly programmed in our minds in some kind of way." Brown argues that white supremacy wants the church gone because the church is its biggest threat. There are many Black churches and organizations working to better the experience of Black people. This fact is often overshadowed by the more glaring instances where the Black Church falls short. The good work that is done needs to be highlighted and given more support. The Black Church tradition of helping the community is obscured, hidden from view, even compromised, but not dead. With that said, Brown's response is troubling. His move to connect King's piece to Glaude's is problematic. King only uses the word "dead" once and highlights the opportunity for new life. Her tone and method are different from Glaude's. A fair reading of King's article doesn't reveal someone who is tearing the church down. Rather, it shows someone who has questions about its present and hopes for its future.

Next, Brown appears to suggest that a substantial critique of the Black Church is tantamount to working with white supremacy. He suggests that it cannot be “simple coincidence” that the death of the Church is discussed when white supremacy is on blatant display. He writes that to consider the church dead is “ignorant or at worst politically naïve.”

This is a common refrain. When Black people express well-measured critique of the Black Church, it is often labeled as distraction at best, or at worst, an anti-black strategy. This extends the idea that one cannot be black while acknowledging other areas of oppression, such as sexism or transphobia. In today’s public arena, with a common embrace of intersectionality in Black spaces like Black Youth Project and others, this notion creates even more distance.

Perhaps it is best to leave metaphors behind to discuss this tension. The Black Church is not literally dead, as millions of people flock to its pews every Sunday. However, the Black Church is no longer relative to the lives of many Black people. Yes, millennials have a general frustration with the church in larger numbers than older generations. However, many of our critiques are not new. People of every generation expressed similar ideas about the church’s shortcomings, and have often experienced the same pushback from churches who disagree.

In too many instances, the Black Church has served as an impediment to the flourishing of the Black people it claims to love. Many Black Churches adhere to white evangelical theology, which also informs their understanding of sexuality, gender, poverty, and even racial politics. I conducted research into the policies discussing LGBTQ people in historic Black Church denominations which has presented at Howard University. All condemn same-sex relationships and prescribe disciplinary measures for clergy who decide to honor them in official capacities. Every few months, a prominent Black Christian preacher or music artist advocates for the further marginalization or even death of LGBTQ persons. Little is said or done to sanction, reprimand, or even engage a conversation around these issues. Sexism is still the norm, even though the church would truly be dead if it were not for the time, talent, and treasure of women. Sexual assault isn’t fully grasped, what with Marvin Sapp working with R. Kelly for his gospel album.

It is strange for those who have felt the full force of the church’s bigotry – a bigotry absorbed from the adoption of white theology – to see it die? Especially if the church tried to kill them first and still poses a significant risk to their wellbeing? That isn’t baffling; that’s a rational response. To suggest that pushback to these

and other critiques is a ploy of white supremacy is to silence the very people the Black Church is supposed to care for.

A church that is unwilling to stretch itself toward the needs of all is a church that is disconnected from the passion and purpose of Jesus Christ. And as scripture outlines, to be disconnected from Christ is to be cut from the vine. The Hebrew scriptures depict prophets who are willing to bring Israel and Judah to task to restore justice and peace in the name of God. If the same prophetic witness that the Black Church claims to have cannot function inward to extend justice to all in its sanctuaries, then it loses its right to extend it outward. It's become sounding brass and tinkling symbols.

Verdell graduated from The Howard University School of Divinity in 2012. He is a regular contributor to national conversations about progressive religion via public writing, preaching, public speaking, and teaching. He resides in the DC area, and can be found on the web at Verdell.org.

Donna Y. Lawson

Masters of Divinity 2018

Wake Up!

God puts dreams in our hearts and writes a destiny over our lives. If we trust God enough to take God at His word, we find ourselves on a journey toward the fulfillment of that dream. It all started through the desires of my parents' hearts; that one or all of their four children would use the Gospel and life of Jesus Christ as a model for addressing the needs of the community to enrich peoples' lives and faith.

Growing up Black in a Christian family, we experienced all kinds of challenges, racial prejudices, finances, and unemployment, lack of affordable housing, poor education and poor access to healthcare. I remember the long line at the community health center as my mother waited for her number to be called and the doctor to see her children. I remember blocks of cheese and powdered milk. I remember the words of my father "We can't afford it. But, I will see what I can do." and the words of my mother "God, will make a way somehow." My parents had little financial resources and what they could afford to give their children came with great sacrifice. Too often, they "robbed Peter to pay Paul." That meant that they took money from one bill to pay another in hope that they would gather up enough money to pay the original bill before the due date. Yet, my parents managed to give my siblings and I the greatest gift ever -The Black church.

"Although not perfect and certainly in need of reform, the black church is still the gathering place of oppressed people who come seeking, if nothing else, temporary release from the hurts, pains, and pressures of life. Nothing shapes oppressed people's values beliefs, and sense of right and wrong more powerfully than the black church. It may not be all it could be in meeting the needs of the community, but it is all the oppressed have in a cruel and hostile world." (Reginald L. Davis)

I love the black church. I was raised and nurtured in the community of the black church. In the black church I learned of Jesus. Although the mural of Jesus painted in the lobby entrance of the church was a blonde hair, blue eyed, white man, he was not the Jesus that the black church formed in my heart once I entered the sanctuary. I suspect that the image of the white Jesus painted on wall was probably the request of the white Dutch missionary that oversaw the church. I believe

that it was the design of the worship service, the testimonies and lived theology of a Jesus, born of immigrant parents, displaced by the inhumane laws of those in position of power, whose mother was forced to give birth in a place unregulated by the Center for Disease Control, innocent, yet brought to suffer under the leadership of the governor, unarmed and killed at the hands of law enforcement officers, couldn't breathe but managed to cry "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" were the catalyst, which pushed me to believe that my Jesus was not the Jesus of the oppressor. My Jesus was oppressed. My Jesus was like me.

This Good News of the Gospel not only shaped my family, the news shaped my community. The Black church has an endless list of contributions to the African American community: the rich tradition of the Black church from the period of enslavement to the present, the contribution of people of color in human history, the contribution of women who significantly contributed to the Black church and the physical well-being of black people, the Black students and the Greensboro Lunch Sit-in, the legal victory in the Brown v. Board of Education case that overturned the legal doctrine of "separate but equal" and made segregation legally impermissible, the organizing of voter registration through the Summer project and passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that restored and protected voting rights to the leadership, faith-based and community activist of the Black Lives Matter movement and beyond; the Black church and community is still standing.

I am appalled that I would even have to respond or even be asked to entertain the thought of the relevancy or irrelevancy of the Black church. Is anyone questioning the relevancy of the White church? The mere fact that the most important social institution in the black community is being questioned demonstrates the length to which white dominant culture influences the thoughts of the community to question its existence.

Wake Up Church! The black church is the only institution that black people have created and control.

Wake Up Church! Masked in this question is the underlining evil of planting discord among the members of the Black church and community. It is an evil that is highly destructive.

Wake Up Church! Have you not heard? Do you not know that "The Negro church, although not a shadow of what it ought to be, is the great asset of the race. It is the capital that the race must invest to make a future." (Carter G. Woodson)

Wake Up Church! For more than 300 years, the black church in America has provided a safe haven for black Christians in a nation shadowed by the legacy of slavery and a society that remains defined by race and class.

Wake Up Church! The black church is established and sustained in spite of the disproportionate number of unarmed black men killed at the hands of lawless police officers, mass incarceration of black men and women, prison to pipeline and kidnapping of black children, HIV/AIDs, poor housing, mass murders of black men and women while sitting in church, hate group rallies across the country, threats of shootings on black college campuses, white supremacist random acts of violence, etc. The black church thrives in spite of these powers.

Wake Up Church! The black church continues to offer affirmation and dignity to people still searching for equality and justice today.

Wake Up Church! Appropriate from Africa through the middle passage to the shores of North America, the invisible institutions of the wilderness to the television age, live streamed Bed-side Baptist church the black church takes us places we never expected to go, with people who never expected to see us there.

Wake Up Church! The Black church is relevant!