African American Spirituality: Through Another Lens

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Abstract. African American spirituality provides a rich lens into the heart and soul of the black church experience, often overlooked in the Christian spiritual formation literature. By addressing this lacuna, this essay focuses on three primary shaping qualities of history: the effects of slavery, the Civil Rights Movement under Dr. Martin Luther King's leadership, and the emergence of the Black Church. Four spiritual practices that influence African American spirituality highlight the historical and cultural context of being "forged in the fiery furnace," including worship, preaching and Scripture, the community of faith and prayer, and community outreach. The essay concludes by recognizing four areas of the lived experiences of African Americans from which the global church can glean: (1) persevering in pain and suffering, (2) turning to God for strength, (3) experiencing a living and passionate faith, and (4) affirming God's intention for freedom and justice to be afforded to every individual.

Introduction

In light of the 10th anniversary of the Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care, I am honored to have been invited to contribute this essay to such a fine journal dedicated to the biblical and theological understanding of spiritual formation. As we know, evangelical spirituality rides upon the shoulders of a long and robust Christian tradition, predicated on the various eras of church history including the patristic, medieval, and Reformation eras through to the present time. Contemporary authors such as Richard Foster and pioneers such as the late Dallas Willard and Robert M. Mulholland, among a host of others, have provided the scaffolding upon which the contemporary spiritual formation movement has been built.

Well-beloved topics that are taught and practiced in evangelical churches, Bible schools, and seminaries include: the process of sanctifica-
tion, personal spiritual disciples or practices, discipleship, intimacy with God, contemplation, lectio divina or sacred reading, Christian mysticism, soul care, and spiritual direction. For example, we mine gems excavated from the desert fathers and mothers, the spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius, and the "dark night of the soul" narrative of Saint John of the Cross. What is seldom explored, however, are the contributions of African American Christian spirituality that may not fit into Anglo-European contexts.

For example, simple searches to ascertain resources related to African American Christian spirituality come up fairly dry, if the searches rely upon typical evangelical categories. Yet a plethora of resources avail themselves under different nomenclature, such as African American religious history, the Black Church, African American religion and culture, and race and religion. Given the cultural diversity within the U.S., it behooves us to learn more about other cultural expressions of the Christian faith through the lens of history that undergirds it. In that all spirituality is “particular,” meaning that the factors of location, historical setting, and culture influence one’s spirituality, we must take these into consideration in order to appropriately appreciate others’ personal experiences and faith expressions.

By way of personal background, I am Caucasian and teach in a seminary that is blessed with a diverse student body. African Americans comprise over thirty-five percent of all master’s students. Furthermore, I attend a multi-ethnic church that is over fifty percent African American. Most of these referenced black students and black church members hail from Black Church backgrounds. As a result, I desire to teach and minister from a place of understanding, given other cultural expressions that are different from my own. While I have enjoyed experiences in black churches, particularly as a new believer and am now very involved in a multi-ethnic church, I offer this essay without pretense of being an authority on African American Christian spirituality but rather in hopes of providing a wider lens for appreciating this cultural expression of Christianity and to fill an obvious lacuna in the spiritual formation literature. Since African American spirituality contributes to life in America, appropriate attention to it is long overdue.

Accordingly, this essay highlights the richness of African American spirituality by focusing on two primary areas. The first section addresses African American spirituality through the shaping quality of history, as

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1 For this essay, the term “the Black Church” refers to historic and independent church denominations that are overseen by black leaders, representing the vast majority of black Christians. The terms “black church” or “black churches” refer to individual or groups of churches whose membership and leadership are primarily black.


3 I will use the terms African American and black, along with Caucasian and white, interchangeably.
history cannot be bifurcated from culture and as each informs the other. As C. Eric Lincoln maintains, "Black religion, like every other, has a cultural context. It is set in human history; and while its critical reference is to God, it reflects the peculiar experience, concerns, and exigencies of the human condition." The second section offers a perspective on selected spiritual practices that have shaped African American spirituality, as they have been “forged in the fiery furnace.” The essay concludes with a focus on how we might celebrate cultural differences in an attempt to bring unity to the body of Christ by honoring African American Christian faith traditions and lived experiences. We turn now to the first section.

**THE SHAPING QUALITY OF HISTORY: FORGED IN THE FURNACE**

Culture within historical and spiritual context has a powerful shaping quality. For African Americans, this shaping history predicates on one foundational reality: the indelible effects of slavery. For it is slavery that catalyzed two other resulting trajectories: the emergence of the Black Church and the Civil Rights Movement, as led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. These three factors have distinctively shaped African American Christian spirituality and provide the needed context for this essay.

**The Influence of Slavery**

Slavery has had an enduring effect upon those brought from Africa to work on plantations and other work environments in the U.S. History reveals that the majority of slaves brought to the U.S. can be traced back

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6 It is ludicrous to assume that the faith experience of all African American Christians is monolithic. The diversity among African American Christian traditions is robust, as evidenced by the formation of seven major black denominations, which comprise 80 percent of black Christians in the U.S.: (1) the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church, (2) the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A.M.E.Z.) Church, (3) the Christian Methodist Episcopal (C.M.E.) Church, (4) the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Incorporated, (5) the National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated (NBCA), (6) the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC), and (7) the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), in C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 1–2.
to the African interior and sold by traders in West Africa. According to scholar Albert Raboteau, slaves held “a complex system of belief,” where the natural and supernatural, along with the secular and sacred, intertwined. Strong community ties and values, veneration of ancestors, and sensitivity to the spirit world dominated African sensivities. After Africans were first brought to Jamestown in 1619 as indentured servants to aid in the production of cash crops such as tobacco, they soon became enslaved, and their numbers grew dramatically.

Slaves consistently experienced severe and inhumane treatment including humiliation, exploitation, intense suffering, and even death. It stands to reason why slaves generally, and those who embraced Christianity specifically, resonated with the hope for freedom against the backdrop of oppression. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya summarize this inner angst, “During slavery [freedom] meant release from bondage; after emancipation it meant the right to be educated, to be employed, and to move freely from place to place. In the twentieth century freedom means social, political, and economic justice.”

Noting this consistent theme throughout black history, Lincoln and Mamiya observe that “freedom has always meant the absence of any restraint which might compromise one’s responsibility to God. . . . And that God wants you free because God made you for Himself and in His image.”

As slaves were introduced to the faith, usually through Christian slave owners, they frequently encountered prohibitions related to full participation in worship services, in addition to being restricted from learning how to read. It was thought that by reading, slaves would become educated and thereby become more emboldened to seek their freedom. Thus, many slave owners surmised that “the freeing of the soul in Christ did not alter the bondage of the body in any way.” Consequently, while some benevolent slave owners treated slaves with dignity, many did not. Christian slave owners frequently applied various constraints to minimize slaves’ participation in church activity.

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8 For example, by 1708, there were 12,000 Africans in Virginia, as compared to 18,000 whites. These trends reflected exponential importation of slaves and high birth rates, in Henry H. Mitchell, Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 23.
9 African American slaves provided the backbone of the American economy throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. A growing abolition movement in the North prompted the Civil War (1861–1865). Although the Union victory culminated in the freedom of four million slaves, the effects of slavery are observable to this day.
11 Ibid.
12 Mitchell, Black Church Beginnings, 24.
This reality led to what E. Franklin Frazier called the "invisible institution," or the phenomenon of black worshippers finding space outside of their masters' control to worship God—in "hush arbors," fields, backwoods, plantation bayous, and occasionally their own slave quarters. Thus, the early origins of the Black Church were born through these clandestine worship meetings. As some became educated and gained their freedom, they established their own worship style, which reflected a distinctive cultural identity and Christian expression, which will be addressed later in this essay.

Conversions of slaves in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries generally registered indifference by many whites—that is until the First Great Awakening in the 1730s, when slaves came to Christ in greater numbers, followed by the Second Great Awakening from 1790 to the 1840s. White revivalists focused mainly on conversion and downplayed position, status, and economic indicators in order to make room for the poor and illiterate who were occasionally allowed to pray and preach publicly. A highly organized plantation missionary movement, the South Carolina Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, first witnessed scores of black slaves converted through benevolent white evangelical missionaries who desired to establish "an "orderly and benevolent social system." Interestingly, the Methodists adopted many of the successful outreach methods modeled by the Moravians, a pietistic community led by Count Nicholaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf in the Herrnhut community in Saxony, which sent missionaries to the southern states and the British West Indies. The Moravians modeled a much different social order that openly received slaves, treated them with dignity, and included them as helpers in communicating the gospel to other slaves.

Many evangelical revivals provided separate meeting spaces for black and white believers, which further reinforced inequality, leading to distinctive black spiritual traditions. Itinerant Methodist preachers like John Wesley and Francis Asbury, however, openly questioned the morality of slavery. For example, in 1774 John Wesley published the piece entitled "Thoughts Upon Slavery," denouncing slavery as "the vilest that ever saw the sun"

13 E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro Church in America (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 23ff. Also see Lincoln and Mamiya, The Black Church in the African American Experience, 7-8. Some worship expressions were syncretic and drew upon forms of spiritual influences from pagan African practices.
and realizing that chattel slavery predisposed all subsequent generations to this vile practice.\textsuperscript{17} George Whitefield followed in Wesley’s footsteps, making many Southern plantation revival tours. Instrumental in many slaves coming to faith in Christ and seeing their educational potential, Whitefield opened a school to educate bondchildren, maintaining that black children “are naturally capable of the same improvement” as white children.\textsuperscript{18} Whitefield would endure open hostility from slavery defenders, many of whom represented traditional Anglicanism. While some white preachers advised slaves to serve God in hopes of one day being free, Thomas Rankin, the first Methodist anywhere in British America, publically opposed slavery, calling it for what it was—sin.\textsuperscript{19}

Given the polarity between slavery and biblical Christianity, how is it that many Africans and African Americans became Christians? Abolitionist Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) addressed this paradox. How could slave owners pray on the Sabbath and then beat slaves on Monday, in that “the warm defender of the sacredness of the family is the same that scatters whole families . . .”?\textsuperscript{20} Douglass acknowledged that while some slaves became atheists because of these inherent contradictions (i.e., how could a loving God allow Christian slave owners to mistreat slaves?), others grasped the hope in Christ who gave them strength to forebear, as they drew upon biblical teachings and worshipped the God who became to them their only hope and eternal deliverer. Portions of Scripture, including the gospels and the Exodus motif in the Old Testament where Israelites awaited freedom from Egyptian bondage, deeply resonated with converted slaves.\textsuperscript{21} Additionally, the realization that Jesus came into the world to exalt the humble and that God was no respecter of persons contributed to a deepening faith through commonality, community, safety, and identity that would eventually lead to black congregations.

Unlike other regions where slavery proliferated, such as Brazil and the British West Indies, black slaves in the U.S. loosened from their African spiritualism to embrace evangelical Christianity. According to Raboteau, “In the United States the gods of Africa died.”\textsuperscript{22} The appeal of “American Evangelical Protestantism, with its emphasis on biblical preaching, inward conversion, and credible accounts of the signs of grace, was not as conducive to syncretism with African theology and ritual,”\textsuperscript{23} whereas Catholic piety, for instance, supported African religious elements such as veneration of saints. Thus from the seeds of the Great Awakening, the Black Church developed.

\textsuperscript{17} Cited in ibid., 111.
\textsuperscript{18} Cited in ibid., 93.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 111.
\textsuperscript{21} Hayes, \textit{Forged in the Fiery Furnace}, 67.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 86.
\textsuperscript{23} Raboteau, \textit{Slave Religion}, 88.
The Emergence of the Black Church

The responsiveness of slaves to American Evangelicalism planted seeds for the eventual birth of independent black churches.24 Initially, however, black converts joined segregated white Baptist and Methodist churches, where blacks were relegated to galleries or back pews.25 Whites and blacks often had separate church entrances, with a wide aisle separating them. When black membership grew, separate services were offered. In some cases, when white members left, black members established separate church entities.

Although the Methodist General Conferences and the General Committee of Virginia Baptists condemned slavery in the 1780s, slavery advocates successfully overturned these decisions, disenfranchising black converts. In some cases, black congregations were led by white pastors, but understandably were not as free as churches with black pastors. In the 1770s and 1780s, Baptist and Methodist denominations supported the licensing of black men to preach and pastor their own people.26 The influence of these early pioneering "slave preachers" is incalculable, dramatically changing the religious landscape of the South between 1770 and 1820. As the gospel was preached, slaves received Christ and were baptized. According to Raboteau, these black preachers "applied the teachings of Christianity to the experience of the slaves (and free blacks) by interpreting the stories, symbols, and events of the Bible to fit the day-to-day lives of black people."27 Although black churches had restrictions placed upon them in the slaveholding South, they nevertheless took shape and thrived.

It is believed that the first independent black church was founded in Augusta, Georgia, sometime between 1765 and 1783, followed by churches in Augusta and Savannah. These churches would then plant daughter

25 Raboteau, Slave Religion, 137. Also see Raboteau, Canaan Land, 23–24 for one example of this travesty. Richard Allen, a former slave, who experienced discrimination at a racially mixed church in Philadelphia in the early 1790s, was instructed to sit in an upstairs balcony, rather than on benches blacks normally frequented. During opening prayer, another black parishioner, Absalom Jones, was asked to move from the front to the back of the newly built balcony. Before the prayer time ended, Jones was forced to move, which precipitated all the black congregants exiting the church. This event led to Richard Allen establishing Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church in Philadelphia in 1794. Whereas Allen later became an A.M.E. bishop, Absalom Jones became the pastor of Philadelphia's St. Thomas African Episcopal Church in 1794. See also Lincoln and Mamiya, The Black Church in African American Experience, 50–52 for how, in 1787, Allen and Jones organized the Free African Society, which first engaged in benevolence but also supported worship services.
26 Raboteau, Canaan Land, 19.
27 Ibid., 19–20.
congregations. Other congregations were planted in cities like Williamsburg and Petersburg, Virginia, with free blacks filling leadership roles.28

By 1800, black Methodists churches began to be established, fostered by black members responding to revivals and camp meetings, mainly in Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina.29 Methodist circuit riders and the autonomy of local white Baptist preachers in the rural South contributed to rapid dissemination of and response to the gospel. For blacks displaying a fervor and giftedness for exhorting others, they were allowed to preach to other blacks, and sometimes to unconverted whites.30

As tension continued over slavery, so did tension over religious independence. During the first half of the 1800s, slave insurrections in the South resulted in prohibitions against black church autonomy. For example, the three largest slave revolts in American history were planned by slave preachers, with Nat Turner’s rebellion being the most notorious in 1831 in Southampton County, Virginia.31 Parenthetically, these insurrections diametrically contrasted with the means and methods of the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968). Consequently, for fear of further revolt, some black Baptist churches in the South were either closed altogether or combined with white churches.

These slave rebellions, however, did not completely thwart rural black churches from being established in the 1800s. By addressing the felt needs resulting from poverty and discrimination and by appealing to the Bible that upheld the dignity of each person as created in the image of God, many black churches in the North took up antislavery positions. As the center of gravity began to shift from rural to urban, denominations such as the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church in 1816 and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A.M.E. Zion) Church in 1822 began to grow.32 Urbanization continued through the Civil War (1861-1865), as Underground Railroad leaders like Harriet Tubman, an A.M.E. Zion member, helped slaves escape to free states in the North and transition to cities.33 The estimated 90,000 African Americans who initially escaped to the North were the first fruits of the massive migration to come.34 Subsequently, church-based freedman’s societies evolved to assist blacks who had escaped slavery.


30 Ibid., 133–34.

31 Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in African American History*, 203. The other two revolts were led by Gabriel Prosser in 1800 near Richmond, Virginia and Denmark Vesey in 1822 in Charleston, South Carolina.

32 Ibid., 115.

33 Ibid., 117–19.

34 Ibid., 9, 95. In 1890, about 90 percent of the black population lived in poor rural counties in the South. In 1990, over 80 percent lived in urban areas, with one-third being middle class, reflecting a colossal migration to the North following World War I and the U. S. economic decline after the 1920 boll weevil epidemic that destroyed cotton crops. Jim Crow segregation and the need for cheap labor in the industrializing North were also contributing factors.
From 1870 to 1970, seven million black people migrated to the North.\(^{35}\) As a result, black churches proliferated and attempted to meet the needs of migrants (i.e., soup kitchens, housing, and employment).\(^{36}\) Good Samaritan societies within churches assisted those in need, and churches became like extended families to those without families.\(^{37}\)

One aspiration common to black church members in the South and the North focused on the promise of spiritual and actualized freedom. Practically speaking, economic and educational opportunity provided collective goals. As a result, black denominations were established in the twentieth century. Eighty percent of black churches would align with one of seven major black denominations, reflecting Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal constituencies.\(^{38}\)

Although beyond the scope of this essay, the Azusa Street revival, led by African American William J. Seymour, grew into an interracial congregation in Los Angeles from 1906 to 1915. Poverty-stricken "with a hunger to learn more about the Bible and theology," Seymour studied under Charles Parham in Houston, but had to sit in the hallway because blacks were not permitted in the same classroom as whites.\(^{39}\) From these meager beginnings, Seymour would learn about and experience that the Holy Spirit’s baptism brought power for service. What divine irony that God would use the son of former slaves to lead this historic revival that would eventually usher in the global Pentecostal movement, which persists to this day.\(^{40}\) Seymour’s vision for interracial unity through the Holy Spirit, although never fully realized, was perpetuated by many who visited Azusa and brought the

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\(^{35}\) Ibid., 118.

\(^{36}\) Chosen because of his impartiality, Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish sociologist and economist, who undertook a study of U.S. race relations in the 1940’s through a Carnegie Foundation grant, documented the cycle of racism that prohibited blacks from full participation in American society in *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1944), vol. 2, 867.


\(^{38}\) See footnote #6 for the listing of these denominations.


revival back to their respective locales, including Bishop Charles Mason of the Church of God in Christ of Memphis.\textsuperscript{41}

What would undoubtedly catapult the Black Church into the center stage of American history, however, was the Civil Rights Movement. Threading African American spirituality and social action, this movement fused the spirituality, hopes, and aspirations of African Americans.

\textit{The Influence of the Civil Rights Movement and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.}

No other single contemporary occurrence contributed more to the identity of African Americans and the shaping of African American spirituality than the ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr., leader of the Civil Rights Movement. His biblical theology and prophetic voice forged an undeniable confluence between African American history, spirituality, and the aspirations of a people longing for freedom and equality.\textsuperscript{42} As a pastor, King appealed to America’s highest moral sensibilities, challenged the status quo, and called forth the Black Church to take its place in history through following Jesus’ message of love and forgiveness demonstrated in nonviolent resistance. Through preaching, speeches, and social activism, his consistent message presented a theology of the cross that imprinted the hearts and minds of a people whose mission to arrive at the Promised Land had become palpable.

For King, suffering for righteousness’ sake, as embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus, had profound personal and social ramifications. He asserted, “There are some who still find the cross a stumbling block, and others consider it foolishness, but I am more convinced than ever before that it is the power of God \textit{unto social and individual salvation} . . . The suffering and agonizing moments through which I have passed over the last few years have also drawn me closer to God.”\textsuperscript{43} King’s personal piety was evidenced in his humble obedience to God.


\textsuperscript{42} Although a full analysis of the influence of King and this era is beyond the scope of this essay, further resources include David L. Chappell, \textit{A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow} (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); David L. Chappell, \textit{Waking from the Dream: The Struggle for Civil Rights in the Shadow of Martin Luther King, Jr.} (New York, Random House, 2014).

For example, during the onset of the movement, King received an especially threatening phone call around midnight after the Montgomery bus boycott launched. Understanding the severity of the threat and feeling the weight of the cross he was called to bear, King experienced the strain of his own weakness. Turning to God in prayer in his kitchen, King heard God speak, “Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you, even until the end of the world.” King would then affirm, “And I’m going on in believing in him. You’d better know him, and know his name, and know how to call his name.” Indeed, African American Christian spirituality was tested in knowing how to call upon and trust in Jesus’ name. And in Jesus’ name, this movement grew—not only because of the unity of black clergy who provided leadership and garnered followers but primarily because God had blessed it.

Just like Mordecai refusing to obey the king’s command in bowing to Haman (Est 3:2), so too African Americans refused to bow to unjust laws. The application of Christian ethics where love was returned for hate and nonviolence for violence created an existential irony. Here a persecuted people applied biblical principles to overturn an evil system, which was for all intents and purposes perpetrated by a Christian establishment. The apostle Paul’s exhortations: “Do not overcome evil with evil, but overcome evil with good” (Ro 12:21) and “Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others” (1 Co 10:24) embodied King’s theological values and the movement’s strategy. King used all of his influence to bring the nonviolent mission through the womb of the Black Church, with the support of sympathetic whites. The unity within the movement undergirded the moral authority needed to speak truth to power in positional leadership structures.

King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”, written on April 16, 1963, defended the nonviolent movement, openly criticized by eight white Alabama religious leaders. King respectfully challenged readers to America’s highest ideals and Judeo-Christian heritage in order to overturn segregation, while also marshalling the Black Church to remain resolute. Highlighting

44 The Montgomery bus boycott lasted from December, 1955 to December, 1956.
46 Ibid.
47 Lincoln, Race, Religion, and the Continuing American Dilemma, 98.
that civil disobedience was in response to a higher moral law, he wrote of the three Hebrew young men who refused to obey Nebuchadnezzar’s laws and the early Christians who willingly suffered or died rather than dishonor God by obeying the unjust laws of the Roman Empire. Thus, King called the church to be a thermostat, rather than a thermometer, in order to transform “the mores of society” to a higher place of biblical and moral congruence.

Moreover, the Civil Rights Movement legitimized the personhood of African Americans, their identity and dignity, and the collective power of nonviolent protest. The long road to freedom through marches, sit-ins, and boycotts not only captured the spirit and soul of a people but also tapped into the conscience of white America, calling it to actualize its espoused moral values. Bolstered by King’s leadership, the Civil Rights struggle guided by Christian spiritual fortitude, enhanced the stature of the Black Church. Describing specific practices contributing to African American Christian spirituality, then, follows on the heels of describing the effects of slavery, the development of the Black Church, and the influence of King and the Civil Rights Movement.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES FORGED IN THE FIERY FURNACE

When German theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer came to the U.S. for postdoctoral study in 1930, he met, among others, Albert (“Frank”) Fisher, an African American fellowship recipient. Having received a one-year Sloane teaching fellowship at New York’s Union Theological Seminary, Bonhoeffer expressed displeasure regarding the theologically weak students at Union and the liberal theology that was being taught. After visiting many churches, Bonhoeffer observed that the white churches evidenced the same theological deficit that he observed at Union. Fisher then invited Bonhoeffer to attend Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, where Bonhoeffer was introduced to African American spiritual practices that would both surprise and transform him.

49 Ibid., 525.
50 Ibid., 531.
51 The 1954 landmark Supreme Court decision in the Brown v. Board of Education in Topeka outlawed racial segregation in public schools, took decades to implement, and led to the desegregation of other public places.
52 Lincoln, Race, Religion . . ., 96.
At Abyssinian, Bonhoeffer heard the gospel powerfully proclaimed under Dr. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., was enlivened by the exuberant worship—"with captivating passion and vividness,"54 and viewed black church music as "some of the greatest artistic achievements in America."55 In addition to teaching Sunday school to young people, Bonhoeffer also taught a weekly Bible study to black women and assisted in the weekday church school. Submerging himself in service to the African American community and visiting many homes, he commented, "This personal acquaintance with Negroes was one of the most important and gratifying events of my stay in America."56

Observing both the immanent yet transcendent God in a Christ-centered church, Bonhoeffer gained a historical and cultural perspective of African American spirituality in light of contemporary realities that blacks experienced. Bonhoeffer’s close friend and biographer, Eberhard Bethge, noted that Bonhoeffer extensively read African American literature through his interactions in Harlem and collected gramophone recordings of spirituals, that often centered on the cross (i.e., "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?"),57 which he shared with his students after returning to Germany.58

As reflected in Bonhoeffer’s experience at Abyssinian, African American spiritual practices have binocular resonance, as both history and culture developed over time. This section, therefore, describes the role of four spiritual foci that have contributed to African American spirituality in dynamic tandem: (1) worship, (2) preaching and Scripture, (3) the community of faith and prayer, and (4) community outreach.

Worship

At Abyssinian, Bonhoeffer was gripped by how the Spirit infused the service, most notably the worship. Similarly, African American Christian spirituality, then and now, evidences dynamism in worship, regardless of denomination or affiliation. Although disagreement has ensued relative to the carry-over of African traditions, some writers observe that music, shouting, and dancing predate conversion during slavery. More specifically,

54 Ibid., 315. At this same time, the "Harlem Renaissance," which was an intellectual, literary, and artistic movement in Harlem to reshape black identity, as well as a precursor to the Civil Rights Movement, was occurring.
55 Ibid., 269.
57 Reggie L. Williams, Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 25, 81.
Negro spirituals attest to the significance of music, derived from slave songs that had great utility, in that they communicated hope, provided instruction and cohesion, and even encoded messages.59

Also called "sorrow songs," spirituals expressed lament to God in the midst of intense struggle, an appeal for deliverance, and a confidence in God alone to render justice.60 Spirituals also linked the individual to the community, consistently providing an image of slaves as chosen of God.61 Affirming Jesus’ divinity, the spirituals embraced all of life and identified with the One who suffered shame, pain, and blame by dying on a tree and who promised never to leave nor forsake them (Heb 13:5b). The cross meant that “black slaves were not alone in their oppression under slavery. Jesus was with them!”62 Interestingly, Czech composer Antonín Dvořák was so moved by the American spirituals in 1892 as “the only genuine folk music in America upon which a national music could be developed” that he was inspired to compose his Symphony No. 9 (“From the New World”).63

Raboteau noted the continuity between singing, dancing, and drumming, considering African and African American traditions, which informs worship today.64 Corporate worship “is acknowledgement of and response to the presence and power of God as revealed in Jesus the Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit.”65 African American Christians have a history of gathering to affirm God’s providence and Christ’s power, sharing a common historical past, and garnering strength to continue this earthly journey.

Ecstatic behavior, although different from the spirit possession experienced by their African ancestors, was evidenced in camp meetings and black revivalist churches during worship and dancing.66 One particular form of

59 Estrela Y. Alexander, Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African American Pentecostalism (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2011), 42.
61 Lawrence W. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom, 30th anniv. edit. (Oxford University Press, 2007), 33. Lyrics like “I’m a child ob God, wid my soul sot free” [sic] and “To the promised land I’m bound to go” typify this imagery in slave songs.
64 Raboteau, Slave Religion, 35.
dance was called the “ring shout,” originating from African practices.67 People moved around in a circle where they would sing and dance, with their feet not leaving the ground or floor. Often the Spirit would fall upon worshippers, and they would be strengthened.68 Depending on the worship context, traditional hymns were also sung.

Overall the style of Christian music included call and response, syncopation, and repetition—characteristic elements of worship today. The historical progression of worship music first developed from African chants, and then moved to spirituals, to metered music, to improvised hymns, to traditional gospel, to modern gospel, and now to a more contemporary style.69 Overshadowing the emergence of these various genres is the need to feel the music in one’s own soul. Black theologian and spiritual writer Howard Thurman’s assertion that “the clue to the meaning of the spirituals is to be found in religious experience and spiritual discernment”70 can be generalized to African American worship today. Christian experience is enlivened by dynamic worship, as it is by anointed preaching.

Preaching and Scripture

As Bonhoeffer was moved in worship while attending Abyssinian, he was also moved by the preaching. Within four months of visiting churches, he wrote that he “only heard a genuine proclamation of the gospel from a Negro.”71 He was “increasingly discovering greater religious power and originality among the Negroes,”72 while learning about their cultural milieu that was new to him. Interestingly, the preaching tradition in African American spirituality has a long history, dating back to the slavery.

Slave preachers in the antebellum South, mostly illiterate, were respected as leaders in the community who often rallied others to worship

67 Ibid., 73.
69 Costen, African American Christian Worship, 95.
70 Howard Thurman, The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death (New York: Harper and Row, 1947), 12. As a well-respected and recognized leader, Thurman’s influence on African American spirituality was great. His spiritual writings addressed America’s racial issues with directness and tact yet called forth a biblical ethic of love to promote reconciliation and unity. See his Jesus and the Disinherited (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1976/1996) and Disciplines of the Spirit (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1963), where he sets out spiritual disciplines for his generation (i.e., commitment, wisdom, suffering, prayer, and reconciliation).
72 Ibid., 266.
and offered them solace. For example, Thurman recognized the influence of black preachers: "Many weary, spiritually and physically exhausted slaves found new strength and power gushing up into all reaches of their personalities ..." Their revivalist preaching style, often characterized by rhythmic structure and musical tone known as "chanting", began slowly and then built up into a more excited pace. The sermon, sometimes including whole memorized passages, involved the congregation's response of clapping, singing, and shouting, culminating in an emotional peak. This dialogical call-and-response interaction reinforced religious fervor and fortified faith.

Regarding sermons, "most black preachers offered a different reading of the Gospel, one that did not accommodate the system of slavery, and preached that slaves, despite their wretched condition, were in fact the chosen people of God." Sermons often included themes from Exodus, the Psalms, and the gospels and made applications of hearers' lived experience by offering them hope of a better future. As preachers learned to read, the process of studying the Scriptures developed, and the Spirit's empowerment remained vital so that God's proclaimed Word came alive and was experienced.

Even today, according to Lincoln, black churchgoers desire "a rousing sermon with moving singing and fervent praying" as part of the church experience. In some traditional black churches, the sermon is sung in a cadence, reinforcing that singing and preaching are two requisites for successful ministry. Preaching has both a priestly and prophetic dimension, calling hearers to grow spiritually and live ethically, in light of the social evils that persist. Preaching calls one higher to see as God sees and live as God would have one live for personal and social transformation.

According to Anglican Michael Battle, preaching unifies the community to further love God and neighbor. Preaching identifies this love by expounding upon the biblical text, while also reinforcing ministry to the poor, disenfranchised, and broken. Cleophus LaRue cites the distinctive of black preaching as a connectedness between scriptural texts and life experiences, including "a pattern of scripture to which they [congregants] ascribe

73 Thurman, *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, 1.
74 Raboteau, *Canaan Land*, 46–47.
wholeness . . . a sovereign God who acts in concrete and practical ways on behalf of the marginalized and powerless . . . ”

LaRue cites three main characteristics of black preaching: (1) strong biblical content that connects to congregants’ experiences, (2) creative use of language including rhetoric tools of repetition, alliteration, syncopation, intonation, and thematic imagery, and (3) an appeal to the emotions. As a black pastor once remarked to me, “the sermon must be dynamic and Spirit-anointed, and the people must believe that the preacher speaks from experience.” Not coincidentally, it was preaching that first drew slaves to Christ during Great Awakening revivals, followed by oral traditions of Bible proclamation that deepened faith. Having addressed worship, along with preaching and Scripture, we now turn to the influence of community and prayer upon African American spirituality.

Community of Faith and Prayer

While at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, Bonhoeoffer witnessed the unique community of faith among black members. These bonds of love demonstrated “solidarity of suffering” through incarnational experiences, as worshippers identified with Christ. Abyssinian embraced Bonhoeffer, as he embraced them, and most of his free time was spent there, as he witnessed a prayerful posture to all of life. This sense of community that incorporates prayer characterizes the third shaping component of African American spirituality.

From the early days of slavery, black slaves found safety, identity, and support through gatherings in church. For example, Myrdal’s study of U.S. race relations in the 1940’s noted that for blacks the church was “the logical center” for social functions and exceeded a mere place of worship. Having life-giving attachments in one’s community provides a fundamental sense of well-being and social cohesion.

Battle specifically highlights community as the primary distinctive of African American spirituality. He argues that strong community ties originated in African traditions that survived slavery and seeded how the Black Church navigated identity formation in America. A human understanding of community is not enough, argues Battle, but rather having “. . . God’s image of community must remain primary,” which incorporates forgive-

82 Ibid., 9–11.
83 Williams, Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus, 78.
85 Battle, The Black Church in America, 27.
ness, prayer, and reconciliation. Interestingly, these are hallmarks of Dr. King's overarching message, inviting all Americans to a more godly, equitable, and participatory community.

One formidable voice influencing African American spirituality is that of Howard Thurman, mentor to Dr. King. Thurman wrote about community and the need for self-respect that brought dignity to the individual and unity to the body. Thurman warned that full identity includes wholeness, serving as the basis for reinforcing a sense of membership with others who share similar values. Hence, Thurman highlighted that the love ethic must be central to all aspects of community, not only based upon the Great Commandment (Mt 22:36–40), but also the biblical command to love one’s enemies (Mt 5:44). Loving one’s enemies entails reconciliation, offering respect, viewing them as persons, and “uprooting the bitterness of betrayal.” Moving in community not only requires fortifying relationships from within one’s social location but also with those outside of one’s immediate circle, so keenly modeled by Jesus who reached out to the man with leprosy (Mt 8:1–4, across social status lines); the centurion in Capernaum whose servant was sick (Lk 7:2–10, across economic and ethnic lines); and the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:7–26, across ethnic and gender lines). Having a biblical view of community that shares in the life and ministry of Christ is what undergirds African American spirituality.

Likewise, prayer is a reciprocal vehicle for strengthening the community. As church historian James Washington notes, prayer is simply a conversation with God. Washington recounts first learning about prayer from his mother who had a fifth-grade education. Hearing his mother in whispers praying early in the morning in her bedroom while his father was working, he observed how she verbally released her burdens, anxieties, and children to God. In one instance, she cried in sobs, “Please, Jesus!,” invoking God’s immediate help. Panicked, Washington ran to his mother’s side, trying to console her. Through these moments, Washington witnessed how prayer was a way of life for her. In addition to his mother, he would have other prayer mentors, including a sickly and elderly black woman whom his mother asked him to serve on a daily basis. She also modeled for Washington that prayer was a way of being, as she talked to the Lord about everything.

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86 Ibid., 39–40.
89 Ibid., 94.
91 Ibid., xxxi–xxxiv.
Prayer has provided African Americans with a formidable vehicle for seeking God’s presence, affirmation, and divine grace, most notably in crisis. Many prayers in the African American tradition have revolved around hope, or the Lord making a way where there seemed to be no way. Washington’s collection of prayers by African Americans from 1760 through 1994 place prayer at the very fulcrum of African American spiritual life. For example, some recorded prayers of Richard Allen (1760–1831), founder of the A.M.E. Church, include, “O, MY God, in all my dangers, temporal and spiritual, I will hope in thee who art Almighty power, and therefore able to relieve me; who are infinite goodness, and therefore reading and willing to assist me” and “O, crucified Jesus! In whom I live . . . inflame my heart with Thy holy love, that I may no longer esteem the vanities of this world., but place my affections entirely on Thee.”92 Abolitionist and women’s rights advocate Sojourner Truth (1797–1883) proclaimed her complete dependence upon God in prayer: “. . . I believe in it, and I shall pray. Thank God! Yes, I shall always pray.”93

Of special note is how black spirituals began as prayers sung to God, affirming that God answers prayer and honors the soul’s seeking. Examples include “A little talk wid Jesus makes it right” or “Do Lord, Do Lord, Do remember me.” Spirituals were often sung at prayer meetings,94 and became the predecessor of African American gospel music, where prayer is still set to music, as in James Cleveland’s “Lord, Help Me to Hold Out.” As with worship, preaching and Scripture, the community of faith and prayer has been forged in the fiery furnace of life circumstances, as has community outreach.

Community Outreach

At Abyssinian, Bonhoeffer witnessed a senior pastor who “combined intellect and social vision,” in combating racism, while keeping the gospel central to his message.95 Pastor Powell’s social vision included ministry to black migrants from the South and building Harlem’s first community recreational center. Powell’s reconciliation efforts reached across ethnic lines through “Reconciliation Trips,” in which a different group of whites was invited to Abyssinian monthly to observe the educational, social, and religious programs, which included a teacher training school, a Red Cross

92 Ibid., 10–11.
93 Ibid., 55.
94 Cf., Raboteau, Canaan Land, 47.
nurse training classes, housing and land development, and an employment agency. Historically, community outreach has been an integral spiritual practice in African American spirituality.

Before and after Emancipation, black Christians have traditionally offered help to those within their respective communities, demonstrating the Great Commandment of loving one's neighbor as oneself. From the days of the Underground Railroad where black churches assisted slaves to escape to the North to Black Church initiatives today, black Christians have tried to uplift other blacks, affirming Du Bois' observation over a century ago that "... the Negro church has become a centre of social intercourse to a degree unknown in white churches... Consequently all movements for social betterment are apt to centre in the churches."97

Lincoln and Mamiya's 1990 comprehensive study of the Black Church reinforces this assertion.98 Of the 1,900 black ministers representing 2,100 black churches, 71% of them reported community outreach programs, with urban churches more engaged than rural ones. These authors reason that the black church has an institutional centrality that the white church lacks and that black churches have a range of social problems not experienced within white constituencies.99 Of the largest black churches, about 90% of them surveyed cooperated with social agencies, whereas 43% cooperated with civil rights organizations.

Community outreach examples abound. They include affordable day care centers, after-school youth programs, mentoring programs, literacy initiatives, grandparent programs to assist primary caregivers of children, drug and alcohol prevention programs, sexuality programs to address teen pregnancy and HIV/AIDS awareness, parenting classes, food pantries, clothing banks, housing assistance and/or financial assistance for seniors, public policy advocacy, and outreach to the homeless. A dialectic between the black church and the community in which it is comprised provides a fluid interface. The Black Church offers an interface between racial, political, economic, educational, and social concerns that motivate it to direct involvement.100

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96 Williams, Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus, 91–92.
99 Ibid., 188.
Community outreach supersedes a mere check-off obligation of Christian duty, but rather comprises the essential ethos of many black churches—to serve one’s community in order to build others up and, in so doing, counter the reality and effects of poverty, social injustice, and racism. Micah 6:8 reminds us: “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” Whereas some may criticize this distinctive of African American spirituality as veering too closely to the social gospel, I argue that it is a life-sustaining spiritual practice of putting one’s faith into action (Mt 5:3; Ja 2:17–19) through ministry to the poor, emphasized by Jesus’s life and teachings (Mt 25:35; Lu 4:18) that is a reasonable outgrowth of the gospel as it was lived in historical and cultural context.

The next section offers a perspective regarding how we might celebrate the lived experiences of African American Christians and learn from them.

CONCLUSION: CELEBRATING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Christian spirituality rides on the parallel tracks of history and culture. This essay focused on the shaping quality of slavery, the development of the Black Church, and the influence of the Civil Rights Movement, as led by Dr. King, followed by a brief overview of spiritual practices that have emerged through historical and cultural location. This concluding section focuses on celebrating cultural differences in an attempt to bring unity to the body of Christ by honoring others’ Christian faith traditions and lived experiences. A recent Barna survey highlights these differences in order to foster unity.

Based upon three surveys, the Barna Group explored how black and white Christians practice the Christian faith, the results of which were not surprising. First, for black Christians, spiritual progress connoted more focus on experience than on achieving goals, in that they spiritually matured as they overcame life’s storms. Second, whereas black Christians reported more communal rhythms of spiritual practices, white Christians were more likely to regard their spiritual life as “entirely private” and individualistic. Third, “black Christians were more likely to believe that their personal spiritual lives have an impact on the broader society,” which reflects Dr. King’s value that Christian faith should influence societal justice.

102 Ibid. (para. 7).
Given that 73% of Americans agree that “Christian churches play an important role in racial reconciliation,” the report emphasized: “But as leaders and pastors we must learn to celebrate these differences rather than lament them.”103 Herein is both complexity and sensitivity because we all come from our own cultural norms and possess blind spots. Being open to others provides a first step to overcoming ethnocentrism. The Barna report concluded, “Approaches detached from experience that are privately practiced might struggle to appeal to the black Christian experience. Likewise, approaches that rely heavily on broader social mechanisms (such as mentorship structures or large groups) for discipleship will be met with similar reluctance for a white Christian.”104

How will an appreciation of others’ Christian experiences emerge, given ethnic and cultural differences? Social psychologist Christena Cleveland provides some direction, cautioning against the inherent tendency of forming in-groups and out-groups when in diverse settings. She highlights how categorizing others pollutes our perceptions of and interactions with them.105 Furthermore, she identifies the tendency to view ourselves as better than those who are different from us, in what she calls the “gold standard effect.”106 This tendency leads to serious misunderstandings and judgments.

To overcome this tendency, Cleveland suggests creating positive cross-cultural interactions, which may be the only way to address our cognitive and emotional biases, as we posit our identity clearly in Christ.107 Embracing cross-cultural relationships will require stepping out of our comfort zones, being willing to risk, and a desire to learn more about others who are different from us. Within church settings, leaders have a role to play by not only teaching on biblical and theological foundations of unity to enhance cross-cultural sensitivities and create social opportunities for relational development but also by inviting participation from those of other ethnicities and backgrounds at every level of leadership.

If appreciation for others’ diverse Christian experiences is to occur, we will need, in John Perkins’ words, to find “a new language—one of love—that affirms and heals, instead of wounds and destroys.”108 Godly love, indeed, is the final fight, because love covers a multitude of sins (1 Pe 4:8) and will ultimately win against every form of hate and division.

In conclusion, African American Christian spirituality offers a rich historical and cultural incubator from which we can glean, as identified in four areas.

103 Ibid. (para. 13).
104 Ibid.
106 Ibid., 70.
107 Ibid., 152–75.
108 John M. Perkins, Dream with Me: Race, Love, and the Struggle We Must Win (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017), 203.
First, perseverance in pain, suffering, and the testing of faith (James 1:2–3) through a long history of racism and discrimination provides hope in a long-suffering God who suffers with us, regardless of ethnicity, and offers us comfort (2 Cor 1:3–4). This message of perseverance provides rich opportunity for dialogue with the persecuted church worldwide that is suffering because of discrimination against Christians in diverse areas of the world, not the least of whom are located in the Middle East.

Second, turning to God for strength, provision, and protection offers a consistent theme from the time of slavery until now. Finding one’s strength in God (Ps 84:5–7; Is 40:29) is an applicable theme that the global church can likewise learn from, given the demeaning of the Christian faith in an increasingly secular landscape.

Third, the passionate expression of African American spirituality evidenced in worship, preaching and Scripture, the community of faith, prayer experiences, and community outreach that contribute to health and vitality offers the church worldwide a great reminder that the Christian faith is not a dead faith but rather one that is fully alive, affecting the emotions by the Spirit (Eph 5:18b–20).

Fourth, African American spirituality affirms that freedom and justice are God-given values that should be accorded to every human being regardless of ethnicity, as each is made in God’s image. We serve a loving and just God who will one day make things right, as we look to the glory that is set before us (Ro 8:18). African American Christians offer a prophetic voice that liberty and justice for all is a fight worth fighting—first on our knees and then in the power of the Spirit.

If we are to be effective witnesses of the life-transforming power of Jesus Christ and influence our world as we are commanded (Mt 28:18–20), then appreciating and celebrating our unique Christian cultural and historical experiences that have shaped us becomes more vital. As this essay has focused on African American spirituality, specifically the shaping quality of slavery, the development of the Black Church, the influence of the Civil Rights Movement under the leadership of Dr. King, and four spiritual practices that have developed over time, I call for celebrating these distinctives in an effort to bring unity within the American church so she can live up to her full potential. While the American church has many opportunities to make progress in this regard, the time is now to work toward establishing unity, not uniformity, by honoring cross-cultural diversity. Are we brave enough to receive God’s grace to not only see through another lens but also to take the next faithful step to usher in a God-centered, multiethnic unity?

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