

Black Power and Christianity

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Young Stokely Carmichael revived the term *Black Power* in his now famous speech during the Montgomery March in the spring of 1966. The phrase had become strange to both black and white ears over the years of its disuse. Uncertain of its meaning, whites turned to trusted black spokesmen for a definition. Those black leaders who did not denounce Black Power out of hand set about the task of constructing a positive definition of the term.

At the height of nonviolent activism in the Civil Rights movement, many of the leaders were clergymen. Martin Luther King, Ralph D. Abernathy, and most of the other Southern Christian Leadership Conference spokesmen were ministers. Local black clergymen were among the first to be called on for aid in organizing voter registration drives and freedom marches throughout the South. The heavy involvement of clergymen gave the nonviolent phase of the Civil Rights Movement a distinctly religious orientation. Consequently, leaders demanded black equality as not only a constitutional guarantee but also a God-given right. Appeals to whites amounted to appeals to their sense of Christian obligation. And the methodology of the Movement was continually subjected to moral tests by those who realized that its public posture had to remain consistent with the rationale for its demands.

The blacks of the mid-1960s, however, were relearning a bitter lesson. Their faith in white institutions had been renewed by favorable Supreme Court decisions and a flood of new legislation. An apparently cooperative mood was in evidence among many whites, and the overt racism attributed to the Deep South seemed to be slipping out of favor. But the hostility which met civil rights demonstrators in Northern suburbs, coupled with unimproved conditions in the ghetto, began to create a different impression.

Ominous urgings by white “liberals” that blacks decrease their level of activism and “consolidate” their gains led many blacks to conclude that even the most sympathetic whites had not fully realized the pain of being black in America. And with the rediscovery of widespread white toleration of gradualism, black men — especially the impoverished ghetto dwellers — began to see their plight as essentially unchanged.

The stubborn core of the black man’s problem in America is white racism. More specifically, the black man is faced with a society that refuses to define him as a human being. Furthermore, not only is he defined as a nonperson, but he is expected to respond as a nonperson. James Cone refers to this as an “existential absurdity.” The absurdity is the black man, who must define himself as a human being, facing a world which insists that he respond as something he is not, a nonhuman.¹

Black Power represents the reexamination by blacks of the problem of a subhuman identity. Hence the definition of Black Power. Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton state in their book *Black Power*: “Black people must redefine themselves, and only *they* can do that. Throughout this country, vast segments of the black communities are beginning to recognize the need to assert their own definitions, to reclaim their history; their culture; to create their own sense of community togetherness.”²

Christians who were comparatively comfortable with the “suffer until the enemy feels it” philosophy which underpinned the nonviolent movement often find Black Power disturbing. Black Power and its advocates, therefore, are often doomed to fail the moral tests put to them, because we assume that their redefinitions conflict with ours. Granted, not everyone who shouts Black Power shares a philosophy consonant with that of the Christian. But it cannot be denied that Black Power, as a notion deemed important by millions of blacks, merits more consideration in the light of Christianity than the summary dismissal it has received from many of us.

Finding a position on Black Power that reflects the attitude of Seventh-day Adventists is difficult. Caught between a past influenced by the somewhat liberal racial views of abolitionists and a present dominated by the conservatism characteristic of institutions run by white middle-class Americans, the Adventist Church seems to adhere to a careful noncommitment on the weightier issues of race. Blacks today, however, are demanding commitment — not only to their right to live as citizens but also to their effort to secure a human definition. Each man, therefore, is either a party to the black man’s oppression or an ally in his liberation.

Any institution whose posture on black liberation is unclear presents the

blacks in it with problems; and so it is with many Christian churches, including the Adventist Church. The black Christian's choice not to be *of* the world leaves him very much *in* it. And the almost constant state of rage that James Baldwin says characterizes the mood of the aware black tempts the black Adventist. Yet, the black is told that rancor is a detriment to his experience in Christ. And so he correctly labels white racism as "sin" and dismisses it as further evidence of Satan's chaotic presence.

This tidy device successfully wards off rage until the black Christian encounters that anomaly, the racist white "Christian." Now a new set of problems arises. The Adventist black's defense against the attitudes of racists outside the Fellowship of Christ was not designed to handle the "Christian" bigot, and he is once again as vulnerable as ever.

The racist in the church is a troublesome presence to all blacks, whether or not they choose to admit it. But that presence is far less frustrating than are the efforts to explain it away. Among Adventists one hears churchgoing racists characterized in many ways: (1) as neophyte Christians whose continued growth will lead them to accept all men; (2) as products of social custom whose notions about race are neither right nor wrong; (3) as staunch fundamentalists who perceive the newfangled doctrine of up-close interracial brotherhood as what it is: a ploy of Satan to prevent the preaching of the *real* message of Adventism; and (4) as high-strung persons whose quirks must be tolerated in the interest of harmony. Black people know rationalizations for racism when they hear them. And they also realize that persons who rationalize racism *are* racists.

In addition, blacks know that racist "Christians" are unconverted, and therefore are really not Christians at all. Efforts to sidestep that fact by using the hoary doubletalk of racism's tired apologists only aggravate the black's inner struggle with the rage born of oppression. And the rejected black who, after Benjamin Banneker, feels the "scorn and censure of the world" in turn often rejects the church as yet another once-trusted friend.

Those blacks who survive the painful crisis generated by signed-up white "Christians" and who remain in the church conjure up new mind-devices to keep faith alive. Most often these blacks place total reliance on the teachings of the church, as distinct from the human arguments of many of its white members, and on the just Deity of the Bible. They thereby effectively shut out the white who so often intrudes on their spiritual happiness, dismissing him as an unsavory experience.

This device is imperfect; the tragedy is that it is necessary in the first place. Black Americans who already confront a nation whose words to

blacks historically conflict with its deeds toward them should not have to grapple with the same contradictions in church. And this explains why the black-church and white-church phenomenon exists in most Christian churches, including the Adventist Church. The "racist Christian" is a contradiction of terms, and we both combat and accommodate him by creating two more contradictory terms: "black church" and "white church." The black Adventist church shields the black man from the disturbing presence of the racist "Christian;" the white Adventist church shields the racist from the threatening presence of the black human-being-Christian. And the situation rests uneasily on a maze of official and unofficial nonpolicies often explained in nonstatements by meticulously uncommitted persons.

The assumption that Black Power is an entirely political animal, and therefore not within the scope of church concern, is erroneous. One needs only to listen to the rhetoric of Black Power to understand that its thrust is also spiritual and, in a sense, moral.

Black Power, first of all, claims to be the enemy of white power. If white power, more commonly termed white supremacy, is to be judged by the number and condition of its victims, it is evil. This places Black Power at odds with evil, an evil which dehumanizes its victims. The assumption that Black Power is simply a euphemism for black supremacy does not agree with the definition its advocates give it. Black Power does not seek to undermine any human's status as a human being, as does white power. Rather, it challenges the white man's status as master.

Liberation is the major concern of Black Power. This liberation is not only physical, but spiritual. The redefinition of the black man alluded to earlier is a process with which Christians should identify. Aiding in the formulation of a subhuman definition of a human — which is what all racists do, regardless of their denominational affiliation — is murder. To counteract this is the appropriate work of Christians. But Christian churches have countenanced racism to the point of complicity. And one cannot help the black man reassert his humanity unless one believes in that humanity.

Unfettering the minds of tormented blacks (and whites) would certainly be the work of Christ. After all, with whom did Christ spend his life on earth? Those on the periphery of existence had him live among them. The good news he brought them spoke to their need for a human definition in a hostile world: they were sons of Deity.

Christian churches have not escaped the effort on the part of Black Power advocates to "blacken" all institutions that relate to black people. Today, institutions that do not reflect the culture and value system of the

black community are suspect. Therefore, Christians who desire to continue to speak to the black community must confront this mood.

There seems to be ample evidence that most of our interpretations and applications of Christianity are culturally derived. This fact has plagued the black man in America for centuries. Black men have accepted a Christianity that seems to tolerate their status as oppressed people defined by whites as subhuman. Albert Cleage calls this "slave Christianity," the version of Christianity that masters taught their chattel.³ White masters selected from Scripture the concepts that they felt best supported their status as masters. Slaves, therefore, learned a Christianity convenient to white needs and consonant with the white man's definition of the black slave.

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Were the black man today to continue to accept this slavemaster's sub-human definition, he would deny his most precious identity, that of a child of God. In its place he would be accepting a shabby substitute concocted by sick minds. To fulfill the white racist's concept of what he should be, the black man must become an "it;" this is what living at peace with racism demands. Blacks who countenance racism, consequently, must hate themselves; and this alone eliminates the possibility of a love relationship with anyone, black or white. Therefore, the prospect of accepting the presence of racism in any institution is immoral, as well as unattractive to blacks. Black men must confront white racism and expose it as evil. This is the love-act which is most relevant to oppressed blacks.

The surprising attribute of the new Black Power is its agreement in goals with much of what is traditional in Christianity. If the Christian church should seek to "make human life more human," as Joseph Hough asserts, its duty does not differ significantly from what the Black Power Movement is about.⁴

If Christ became man to suffer the anguish that accompanies our condition, cannot the church "become black" and suffer with those whose blackness brings down torment? Christianity deals with identity and with liberation and with suffering because Christ dealt with them. Christians who insist upon allying with racism have allowed a Black Power Movement similar in aim but different in name to preempt their opportunity to respond to Christ's life. And the black man's self-affirmation continues without them.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 JAMES H. CONE, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press 1969).
- 2 STOKELY CARMICHAEL and CHARLES V. HAMILTON, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Random House 1967), p. 37.
- 3 ALBERT B. CLEAGE, JR., *The Black Messiah* (New York: Sheed and Ward 1969), p. 43.
- 4 JOSEPH C. HOUGH, JR., *Black Power and White Protestants: A Christian Response to the New Negro Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press 1968), p. 146.

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the testing

EDWIN MARKHAM, 1852-1940

When in the dim beginning of the years,
God mixed in man the raptures and the tears
And scattered through his brain the starry stuff,
He said, "Behold! yet this is not enough,
For I must test his spirit to make sure
That he can dare the Vision and endure.

"I will withdraw my Face,
Veil Me in shadow for a certain space,
Leaving behind Me only a broken clue —
A crevice where the glory shimmers through,
Some whisper from the sky,
Some footprint in the road to track Me by.

"I will leave man to make the fateful guess,
Will leave him torn between the No and Yes,
Leave him unresting till he rests in Me,
Drawn upward by the choice that makes him free —
Leave him in tragic loneliness to choose,
With all in life to win or all to lose."