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> It is my solemn belief, that if ever the world becomes Christianized, (which must certainly take place before long) it will be through the means, under God of the *Blacks*, who are now held in wretchedness, and degradation, by the white *Christians* of the world, who before they learn to do justice to us before our Maker––and be reconciled to us, and reconcile us to them, and by that means have clear consciences before God and man.––Send out missionaries to convert the Heathens, many of whom after they cease to worship gods, which neither see nor hear, become ten times more the children of Hell, then ever they were, why what is the reason? Why the reason is obvious, they must learn to do justice at home, before they go into distant lands, to display their charity, Christianity, and benevolence; when they learn to do justice, God will accept their offering, (no man may think that I am against the Missionaries for I am not, my object is to see justice done at home, before we go to convert the Heathens).
>
> David Walker

Introduction

David Walker, a fervent Christian, and a fiery voice within the antebellum period, writing in his infamous Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World in 1829, provided what historian Herbert Aptheker concisely summarizes as "the first sustained written assault upon slavery and racism to come from a Black man in the United States" (Aptheker 1971, 41). While this is true, Walker's Appeal was also a scathing critique of American Christianity, particularly that among his antebellum White brethren,

intertwined with a missiological perspective that has been unique to the African American Christian missiology experience and especially to that of Black evangelicals. It is no secret that African American missionaries are not numerously represented within global missions organizations. Quandaries into why this persists have produced many pontifications such as financial barriers and historically discriminatory practices among missions organizations, to name a few. However, this article seeks to concentrate on a theological tradition within African American Christianity that has focused the Missio Dei within the American context. Walker, as others in this tradition, regarded the Christianization of American Christians as the pressing missiological imperative.

"Christianizing Christians" may seem like a tautological phrase, but it was an ever-pressing reality within Walker's 19th century Boston milieu. His militant Appeal was derived from a world of conflicting Christianities. Born in Wilmington, North Carolina on September 28, 1785, Walker was the child of a free mother and an enslaved father. His existence within his era and geographical locations placed him within competing interpretations of the Christian God and theologized rationales for Black subjugation, yet squarely within the height of the American evangelical tradition, as "Evangelicalism was by the early decades of the nineteenth century the predominant voice on the American religious scene" (Raboteau 1997, 102). Black and white evangelicals shared what religious scholar Glaude calls a "common grammar of belief" but were separated by sociological experience (Raboteau 2004, 331).

> Black Evangelicals, no less than whites, sought conversion, attended revivals, and viewed their lives in biblical terms. There was a fundamental difference between the two, however. American slavery and the doctrine of white supremacy, which rationalized and outlived it, not only segregated evangelical congregations along racial lines, but also differentiated the black experience of evangelical Christianity from that of whites. The existence of chattel slavery in a nation that claimed to be Christian, and the use of Christianity to justify enslavement, confronted black Evangelicals with a basic dilemma, which may be most clearly formulated in two questions: What meaning did Christianity, if it were a white man's religion, as it seemed, have for blacks; and, why did the Christian God, if he were just as claimed, permit blacks to suffer so (Raboteau 1997, 101)?

This theodicean wrestle brought some to the conclusion that the issue was not Christianity in and of itself, nor the Christian God but the issue was the malformed expression of Christianity within the dominant American culture, which needed salvation, beckoning a homeward focus for the Missio Dei.

A missions focus, in the context of the United States of America, for Walker and others in this tradition, served a fourfold purpose. It was the seedbed of hope for the birth of a Christianity that was authentically Christ-like and free from racism; it provided a foundation for an apologetic discourse that rebuffed the notion that Christianity was the White man's religion; it provided the moral grounding and strength behind the Black jeremiad tradition, that called for truth to be spoken to power; and it allowed for Black Christian voices to address pressing social issues related to racial degradation, depicting how expressions of racism were counterintuitive to the Christian message, in a world where Christian theologizing often provided the moral justifications for prejudice.

Walker and others understood themselves to be practicing a different form of Christianity than that of the dominant culture and missionizing in America meant providing an introduction to the "God of the *Blacks*"; that is, a God that cared for the lowly, stood in opposition to injustices afflicted against them, and who would hold oppressors accountable (Walker 1829).

Perspectives in Missions: The Shaping of Missiological Emphases

The outlook of America as a mission field had areas of continuity and discontinuity between Black and dominant culture evangelicalism due to a shared religious tradition yet varying core convictions. The antebellum evangelical revivals brought about mass conversions and missional efforts in which Blacks and Whites alike participated. African American denominations and independent churches were formed during this period, while White denominations and Dissenters experienced awakenings in a religious environment that had been, for the most part, nominal in the period preceding the Great Awakening revivals.

Organizations such as the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) among Anglicans in the South, which had the greatest concentration of enslaved peoples, produced efforts that sought to serve and enliven existing Christian communes while also encouraging slave masters to instruct their slaves or allow them to be evangelized.

Minimal progress in this effort was achieved among White Christians in part, due to the large geographical areas of parishes which did not correspond to the small number of clergy available to attend them. For the enslaved, however, access to the Christian message through White missionaries was severely limited because of economic interest and interrogations of their humanity.

For many slave owners, who entertained the slaves' humanity and their ability to convert, their assumed connection between conversion and manumission was the impetus to refuse missional efforts, as Christians owning other Christians was a questionable affair. Slave owners who jettisoned the idea of African humanity avoided the issue altogether. To little avail, efforts to make room for evangelism among the enslaved and assuage objections, missionaries such as Francis Le Jau while affirming the enslaved humanity, promoted the message that Christianity would produce more obedient and harder working slaves. Although an impasse was present between White missionaries and the enslaved, African Christians among the enslaved, namely Kongolese and Angolan Catholics, provided a missional presence and a challenge to the theologized rationalizations for African enslavement (Daniels 2014, 215-26). Nonetheless, despite their presence and colonial laws passed which eventually codified that conversion would not equate to manumission, widespread conversions of enslaved Africans did not emerge until the arrival of Evangelicalism. Its arrival brought about a changed religious dynamic for Blacks and Whites alike in the American colonies.

In its early years, Evangelicalism had various contributors that helped spread the revival birthed movement because of its simple message and openness to untrained laypeople proselytizing. Among early leading voices in the northern colonies was a Northampton preacher, Jonathan Edwards, who witnessed a diverse acceptance to the message centered around spiritual rebirth and repentance. For the southern colonies, George Whitefield's arrival and ministry in the 1740s proved to be electric as diverse crowds of thousands responded to his preaching. When Whitefield and Edwards brought their characteristically evangelical preaching to their colonial milieus, they entered plural Christian contexts, which before Evangelicalism struggled to view each other as authentically Christian. The ability of Evangelicalism to bridge theological and ecclesiological divisions became a hallmark of the movement. However, for detractors, primarily those from established churches, it represented a danger because of the possibility of upsetting existing social hierarchies which were undergirded by church doctrines. Paul Harvey conveys this sentiment well in noting the alarm of an upper-class Virginian man processing the revivals. "Evangelical persuasions, said one Virginia

legal authority, would be the means by which, 'Wives are drawn from their Husbands, Children from their Parents, and Slaves from Obedience of their Masters'" (Harvey 2016, 35). This concern over social boundaries was not purely imagined by detractors as the early evangelical revivals provided greater opportunity for women exhorters, along with strands of anti-slavery sentiment.[1] However, evangelicals' detractors' concerns over the possibility of the social order being disturbed could not foresee the unifying presence it would produce in the colonies.

The American colonies during the evangelical awakening revivals also coincided with political turmoil and discussion about the relationship the colonies would have with England. Evangelicals would come to help shape the controversy by their theological input. These societal questions soon resulted in the founding of an independent nation. Questions about republicanism and democracy were tackled by both politicians and theologians, and overwhelmingly dominant culture evangelicals put their weight on the side of independence.[2] Thus, evangelical revivals were instrumental in the process of the nation's sense of being a collective. Just as social order was experiencing change, boundaries that divided states – who once thought themselves as separate countries – were being softened. This softening was due in part to evangelical preaching that offered a religious historical trajectory of America through a theology which usurped Biblical language of election concerning Israel, along with the paradigm of liberation found in the book of Exodus; these texts were typologically applied to America.[3]

Furthermore, early American Puritans, who inherited this perspective from English theologians' use of biblical election language applied to their nation-state, had long viewed themselves through this lens but revolutionary and evangelical zeal helped intensify its use within the colonies.[4] This way of preaching also aided in producing language that articulated the colonists' thirst for human rights, which they did not see as being consistent with British loyalty and in turn sought independence and freedom. The call for national freedom preached from pulpits, applied from scripture

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[1] For concerns over social boundaries and anti-slavery sentiment see Kidd, Thomas S., and Barry Hankins. *Baptists in America: A History.* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2015), 1-148; Wesley, John. *Thoughts Upon Slavery*. No. 11204. R. Hawes, 1774; Paul Harvey, *Christianity and Race*. For concerns specifically over gender boundaries see Brekus, Catherine A. *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America*, 1740-1845. (University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[2] This is not to say that all supported the American Revolution but those who did outweighed those who did not. See "The Churches in the Revolution" in Noll, Mark A. *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada.* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1992).

[3] Mark, Noll. "The Image of the United States as a Biblical Nation, 1776-1865" 39-58 in Hatch, Nathan O. *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*. (Oxford Univ. Press, 1982). Cf. "African-Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel" in Raboteau, Albert J. *A Fire in the Bones*. (Beacon Press, 1995).

[4] For an example of early Puritan use of Israel's election, see "John Winthrop, A Model of Christian Charity: A Modern Transcription" in Rodgers, Daniel T. *As a City on a Hill*. (Princeton University Press, 2018).

undergirded by nationalistic theology created a paradox particularly for Black and White evangelicals wrestling with the question of slavery in relationship to the Christian gospel. Evangelicalism's notion of spiritual equality before God proved to be attractive for Blacks and Whites alike. Howbeit, the dividing query became how spiritual equality should affect the temporal order. As the revolutionary period waned and evangelicals sought respectability, slavery became a dividing line and would remain so into the Civil War period.

While anti-slavery sentiment did not belong to African American Christianity alone, the issue proved itself to be a point that shaped the way in which Black evangelicals would view America. White evangelicals, on the contrary – those who aligned themselves with abolitionism and those who were pro-slavery, even after the Revolutionary War largely maintained scriptural election language applied positively to America. For them, the new nation was still the light of the world, even if it needed some reforms. This perspective produced a primarily outward looking missiology. Contrarily for African American Christianity, the stain of slavery on a nation that regarded itself as Christian was incongruous. Slavery along with the violence and injustice it produced could not be reconciled with their understanding of the Christian God, producing a strain of African American missiology that was primarily homeward focused, in an attempt to see authentic Christianity genuinely take root in their homeland.

Perspectives in Missions: America as a Mission Field

The antebellum era – until the post-Civil war period – was marked by widespread millennialism, creating an ethos of eschatological expectation.[5] Millennialism promised the ushering in of a utopian era in conjunction with Christian reform efforts, with its telos being the reign of Christ appearing. For White evangelicals, America was key to this schematic, as seen in Jonathan Edwards in *The Latter-Day Glory is Probably to Begin in America*.

> This new world is probably now discovered, that the new and most glorious state of God's church on earth might commence there; that God might in it begin a new world in a spiritual respect, when he creates the *new heavens* and *new earth* (Edwards 1998, 55-60).

[5] For more on American millennialism, see the helpful compilation by Phillips, Jason, Robert Nelson, Ryan Cordell, Nina Reid-Maroney, Joseph Moore, Jennifer Graber, Scott Nesbit et al. *Apocalypse and the Millennium in the American Civil War Era.* (LSU Press, 2013). Especially helpful for millennialism within the context of African American Christianity see, "Emancipation and African American Millennialism" 154-174.

The American church would evangelize and participate in societal reforms at home, extend Westward, and move out to complete the Great Commission. Evangelicals following Edwards' thinking, believed that America had the "moral power to evangelize the world." (Edwards 1998). However, Black evangelicals doubted not only the moral strength of America but its connection to authentic Christianity.

Reverend Francis Grimke fostered hope in his post-Reconstruction congregation that had witnessed 1,240 unabashed lynchings of Black men and women between 1889 and 1899 by relaying the message that God would grow the "little grain of mustard seed" that existed in America. Speaking to his Washington, DC based congregation in 1899 after a highly publicized and celebrated lynching he remarked,

God has promised to give to his Son the heathen for his inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for his possession and in that promise this land is included. Christianity shall one day have sway even in Negro-hating America…Jesus Christ is yet to reign in this land. I will not see it, you will not see it, but it is coming all the same. In the growth of Christianity, true, real, genuine Christianity in this land, I see the promise of better things for us as a race (Grimke 1942, 268).

Homeward Missiology and Black Freedom

Moving into the 20th century, Black theologians and preachers continued to struggle with the connection that White supremacy and American Christianity shared. Howard Thurman, in his preface to *Jesus and the Disinherited* inquired,

> This is the question which individuals and groups who live in our land always under the threat of profound social and psychological displacement face: Why is it that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically, and therefore effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion and national origin? Is this impotency due to a betrayal of the genius of the religion, or is it due to a basic weakness in the religion itself (Thurman 1949, xix)?

Thurman's first chapter answers these questions by depicting the Western Christian tradition in which America is situated as one that had distorted the person of Jesus Christ and therefore the character of God. This came about by removing Jesus from his oppressed Palestinian Jewish context and by placing him "outside of the sense of community which Israel held with God" (Thurman 1949, 5). He argued, "[I]t is necessary

to examine the religion of Jesus against the background of his own age and people, and to inquire into the content of his teaching with reference to the disinherited and underprivileged" (Thurman 1949). Without doing so the result is,

> ...it reveals to what extent a religion that was born of a people acquainted with persecution and suffering has become the cornerstone of a civilization and of nations whose very position in modern life has too often been secured by a ruthless use of power applied to weak and defenseless peoples (Thurman 1949, 2).

In engaging the misinterpretation of Jesus, he also engaged the missiological implications that explained how a form of Christianity could spread that was impotent towards racism. He went on to say,

> It has long been a matter of serious moment that for decades we have studied the various peoples of the world and those who live as our neighbors as objects of missionary endeavor and enterprise without being at all willing to treat them either as brothers or as human beings (Thurman 1949, 3).

Thurman, who participated in cross cultural and international conversations about Christianity, nevertheless went on to focus his theologizing and church work within in the American context, following in a tradition within African American Christianity that saw the Missio Dei and the rise of authentic Christianity in America not only as participating in their Christian calling to missions but as an avenue to relieve the oppression of his people. Christianizing Christians, or the reintroduction of the Christian Faith was the pressing imperative for the Black church.

Missions in the Contemporary African American Church

The Southern Baptist Convention's International Missions Board's 2020 report found that of its 3,700 missionaries, only .035% were African Americans. The historical context, covered previously in this article, contextualizes one aspect as to why there is a lack of African American representation in international missionary work. Walker's *Appeal* helped give voice to the theological context within the African American church. It focused on the concept of domestic justice in the face of racism and White supremacy, which at times, were interlocked with White Christian theologizing. This led segments of the African American church to focus on "backyard" missions (conducting

missionary work in local-underserved communities) and social justice issues. Furthermore, there has been a hesitance within this segment of the African American church to participate in missions on the continent of Africa because of the complex relationship between missionaries and European colonialism. Dwight N. Hopkins refers to this history as he contrasts the future aim of African American missions versus traditional European American ones:

> Rather than follow a type of imperialistic missionary work that we see carried out by Europe and the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a different Black church missionary activity would focus on solidarity, healing, and liberation for oppressed communities and nations globally (Hopkins 2016, 265).

Historically, the African American church has had to focus on the "mission" of fighting racial injustice in the United States, which lessens room for more formal global missions work. With the current climate of racial tension in the wake of several high-profile police killings of unarmed Black people, this mission will most likely remain a predominant focus of the Black church.

The Social Gospel as Mission in King's Theology

> Let us continue to hope, work, and pray that in the future, we will live to see a warless world, a better distribution of wealth, and a brotherhood that transcends race or color. This is the gospel that I will preach to the world (King 2007, 6).

The African American church has long been entrenched in the movement for racial equality. It has produced some of America's most prolific and profound leaders against racial injustice, such as Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, Rev. Jesse Jackson, and Rev. Ralph Abernathy. In fact, the leading civil rights organization of the 1960s, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), memorialized the importance of the church in its name. Historically, the African American church has never been merely a place of worship; it was also the center of civil rights organizing, a haven for leadership development, and a social network that connected Black communities long before social media.

The social theology of the African American church was further shaped in the twentieth century by the ideology of the social gospel – the idea that the church must focus on practical and social issues and not just spiritual and religious conversion. The

social gospel became an essential teaching within socially involved Black churches and theologians after a long history of development which saw the idea spread from White churches in the northeast to southern Black Baptist congregations. Walter Rauchenbusch, an early advocate of the social gospel, argued in his book *Christianity and the Social Crisis* that the church must focus its attention on social and moral problems (Rauschenbusch 1907). Pastor Henry Emerson Fosdick, a social gospel proponent and contemporary of Rauchenbusch, cautioned the church's condemnation was imminent if it did not focus on social issues. Fosdick pointed out the hypocrisy of a church that,

> ...pretends to care for the souls of people but is not interested in the slums that damn them, the city government that corrupts them, the economic order that cripples them, and international relationships that, leading to peace or war, determine the spiritual destiny of innumerable souls (Fosdick 1933, 25).

These two men greatly influenced Martin Luther King Jr., who would later use these ideas to construct a social theology to challenge racial injustices in the United States. King became the most well-known African American proponent of the social gospel. His views of racial justice, a redistribution of wealth, and political reform influenced the following generations of Black pastors and preachers. As King understood it, the social gospel included a mission to reach White Christians that professed the gospel but had not translated those words into practice as it related to their treatment of African Americans.

As in the past, a segment of today's African American clergy focus their ministry on the immediate concerns of their congregants, and many of those concerns center around the many extrajudicial killings of Black people by police officers. In her book, *Ferguson and Faith: Sparking Leadership and Community Awakening,* seminary professor Leah Gunning Francis wrote about the intersection of social justice work and faith while participating in the protests following the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.

> As a woman of faith, I did not separate my actions in pursuit of justice for Michael Brown from my faith. Instead, I understood them as an expression of my faith...throughout days, weeks, and months since...many other people of faith were taking similar and greater actions. Specifically, I am talking about clergy people (Francis 2015, 7).

For her book, Francis interviewed clergy from the St. Louis area about their participation in the protest movements surrounding the death of Michael Brown. In weeks following the murder of George Floyd, Black clergy such as Reverend Chris Harris, Reverend James Meeks, James T. Roberson III, and the Baptist Ministers Conference of Southern California led rallies and non-violent protests in their respective cities.

While many White churches have had the social luxury of mainly focusing on sending missionaries abroad, Black churches have had to dedicate time, energy, and attention to confronting the harsh realities of racial injustice domestically. Leroy Barber, in an article for *Urban Faith* by Maisie Sparks, points out that "the African American voice and story has much to lend to global missions;" however, the current and continuous presentation of racial injustices in their home context beckons a segment of the African American church to be preoccupied with issues of police killings, wealth inequality, unemployment, and mass incarceration (Sparks 2018). Simultaneously, racial injustices continue to confront White Christians to compel them to connect the principles of Christ to the praxis of their Christianity.

Conclusion

The historical tradition of a homeward or "backyard" focused Missio Dei within African American Christianity speaks not only to a missiological outlook but to a theological concern. This theological concern seeks to connect the American context to a more authentic form of Christianity, which can defeat social and racialized degradations that not only have persisted in the dominant culture but have been upheld – too many times – by Christian theologizing. While this homeward focused missiology does not encapsulate the whole of African American Christianity, because the Black church is not monolithic and has also participated in a sending missiology, it does answer the "why" regarding the lack of global representation of Black missionaries within the African American context. Yet, while there is an absence, there is also a need. To this end, author and leader Leroy Barber eloquently asserts,

> Our history of struggle, of forming a vibrant culture within a culture, and of sacrificing for justice and freedom, witnesses to the truth that the arc of God's love leans toward the betterment of all people. While we might feel a sense of being a minority here, we soon discover that globally, we are not (as cited in Sparks 2018).

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