

Global Missions in the Context of Urban Missiological Needs: Answering a Global Calling While Reaching American Cities

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Fulfilling the Great Commission

The universal call to salvation is pronounced when the LORD promises Abraham, “in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Gen 12:3 KJV). The redemptive motif of Scripture has always included the totality of humanity, not just a select group (for example, the Jewish people). Jesus speaks in alignment with the universal call to salvation when he says, “for God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16 ESV).¹ This message of God’s saving grace and love should be shared by men and women who have a heart for souls.

Like Jesus, who came to seek and to save the lost, anyone who represents His kingdom by sharing the Gospel, must have the same burden. This burden cannot be tainted by ethnic, racial, or cultural prejudices. This burden cannot be jaundiced by political or philosophical nuances that often come between people. Under the New Covenant all humanity is made into one people, namely the Church. Paul reinforces this idea when he writes, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Therefore, any presentation of the gospel that marginalizes people who are different than the presenter of the Gospel fails to emanate the true love of God and the full glory of the Christ of the gospel. Moreover, the Great Commission should be executed through love and compassion.

The execution of the Great Commission, originally given to the 11 disciples of Jesus, is the same assignment for the Church today. The Lord declared, “All authority in Heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all

¹ All Scripture references are quoted from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:18-19). Making disciples from all nations (*ethnos* in Greek), centers Jesus’s command around the idea of a kingdom which is an all-inclusive, multicultural community of people here in the earthly realm. An impactful presentation of the Gospel requires those who carry the message, of necessity, be given to a heightened sense of multicultural intelligence. In this verse the word, “nations” demonstrates the Lord’s desire to reach and save all humanity. Nations, according to the Strong’s concordance is, “ἔθνος (*eth'-nos*); a race (as of the same habit), for example, a tribe; specially, a foreign (non-Jewish) one (usually, by implication, pagan): Gentile, heathen, nation, people” (Blue Letter Bible). The Lord desires to reach the entire world not just in a geographical context but in an ethnic and cultural context as well.

To press His desire further, the Lord challenges Peter not to consider cultural (and by implication ethnic) differences as He was preparing Peter to present the gospel to Cornelius and those in his house. In the narrative of Peter’s ministry to Cornelius, the Bible shares that Peter did not understand the vision which was given to him three times (Acts 10:17a). However, when Peter entered Cornelius’s home, he was able to understand the meaning of the vision. He acknowledged the laws that governed the interaction of Jews with men of other *ethnos*, however, God revealed to him the precious status of all humanity (Acts 10:28). This led to Peter’s presentation of the gospel, which he prefaced by giving special notice to God’s acceptance of ALL who seek Him with all their heart, working works of righteousness to honor him (Acts 10:34-35). In view of this background, anyone who engages in missions should have a healthy sense of the love and compassion God has for humanity. There must be willingness to serve God by serving His people – all nations – with an infectious and engaging presence, one that exudes the person of Christ.

Ministry in Our Own Jerusalem

Global missions is the common context in which missionary work is considered. Leaving the shores of America and carrying the Gospel, along with various supplies, to poor, under-developed nations, seems to be the model upon which the Western world has built its current missionary model. However, sharing the gospel and growing the Kingdom of God begins in the local community. Local missions are an integral part of God’s mission – the *Missio Dei* – and is the responsibility of the local church. Local mission endeavors, therefore, compels the church to engage in the life of the

community they serve. Terry notes, “while one might think that the purpose of missions is self-evident, the late David Bosch in *Transforming Mission* (1991) demonstrated that the missionary efforts of the church throughout the centuries have reflected considerable variety regarding purpose. This variety has ranged from the embodiment of agape to the ‘Christianizing’ of culture to the expansion of Christendom, both in terms of government and orthodoxy” (Terry 2015, 19).

It is this “variety” in American church history that presents a challenge. Before addressing the small number of African American Christians on the mission field, one must contextualize the collective historical framing of the African American Christian perspective. What is meant by, the “Christianizing of a culture”? Does that imply Euro-centric or Anglo-American centric Christian culture? Is the expansion of God’s kingdom to be divorced from the heart the message of the love of God? Here lies the challenge in American church history. Why are those who carry the gospel across oceans not willing to be the embodiment of a loving Savior to men and women of color who live around the corner and down the street from them?

In a country split by slavery for its first one hundred years, many white Christians worshipped and gave devotion to God while showing hatred and disdain for those enslaved in their society. As Lincoln and Mamiya assert, “Two hundred and fifty years of slavery were followed by one hundred years of official and unofficial segregation in the South and the North” (1990, 3). As the events of the recent past indicate, far too many white American Christians are not willing to stand up for or lock arms with Christians of color in the fight for social and economic justice. Since the time of slavery, the Black Church has been the epicenter of theological thought, bridging the gap between the atrocities of the Black American experience and the peace-loving God of the Scripture. From the days of slavery, through the Jim Crow era, the Civil Rights era, and post-Civil rights period, the Black Church has been at the forefront to champion the cause of “the least of these my brethren” (Matt 25:40) in its own communities.

American Church history shows that major denominations experienced splits along racial lines during the early years of the nation. This notation is important because the theology of the African American church has been centered around – not only the redemption Christ offers – but the survival of a despised people. The preaching and teaching in African American churches included – and still does – an emphasis on a God who would rescue the hurting and despised. For example, Lincoln and Mamiya maintain, “the Old Testament notion of God as an avenging, conquering, liberating paladin remains a formidable anchor of the faith in most black churches” (1990, 3).

Existing as a house of refuge, the African American church became the place where their members could rise-up and be recognized as, not three-fifths of a man, but a whole man. As this began to happen, denominations that were once interracial, begin to splinter.

Early American church history chronicles the racial divide that plagues the nation to this day. The Methodist, Baptist, and Pentecostal denominations recorded how their respective denominations separated along racial lines. Lincoln and Mamiya contend, “Unlike most sectarian movements, the initial impetus for black spiritual and ecclesiastical independence was not grounded in religious doctrine or polity, but in the offensiveness of racial segregation in the churches and the alarming inconsistencies between the teachings and the expressions of the faith” (1990, 47). The message of light from the Cross of Christ, the life of the believer, and fulfilling the Great Commission, through missionary efforts both home and abroad, was dimmed by the blatant disregard by white Christians toward their fellow man. Lincoln and Mamiya suggest, “It was readily apparent that the White church had become a principal instrument of the political and social policies undergirding slavery and the attendant degradation of the human spirit” (1990, 47). If there is a true commitment to God, there must be a renouncing of this type of hypocrisy. Therefore, they continue, “against this the black Christians quietly rebelled, and the Black Church emerged as the symbol and the substance of their rebellion” (1990, 47). In the process of African American denominations becoming established in polity and doctrine, their history also suggests a modest effort to develop and deploy missionaries to other parts of the world, mostly the Caribbean and Africa.

These authors also point out, “The Methodist church is noted as being the first denomination formed by African Americans” precipitated by mistreatment of the colored members at the hands of the white members (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990, 47). “The early black Methodist churches, conferences, and denominations were organized by free black people in the North in response to stultifying and demeaning conditions attending membership in the white-controlled Methodist Episcopal churches” (1990, 47). Despite this existential reality, the Black church was determined to spread the gospel around the world. The earliest missionary efforts of the Methodist and Baptist (Pentecostalism not yet being organized as a denomination) were the sending of preachers and missionaries from northern states to the south. For the Methodist, per Lincoln and Mamiya, “Missionary efforts at home were augmented by a strong desire to plant the flag of African Methodism wherever that flag would fly. Consequently, the A.M.E. Church has been the most effective of all the black denominations in its overseas

missionary efforts, claiming 1 million members and over 22,000 churches in Africa and the Caribbean” (1990, 54).

Concerning the Black Baptist movement, it is noted, “During the antebellum period, [however], fugitive slaves and free Blacks in the North did form abolitionist missionary associations and societies, the leaders of which then organized the first regional black Baptist conventions” (1990, 20). Lincoln and Mamiya go on to clarify,

the American Baptist Missionary Convention, had been organized fully two decades before emancipation at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City in 1840, for purposes of evangelization, education, and general racial uplift. This convention was restricted in its activities to the New England and Middle Atlantic areas until after the Civil War, when it sent black ministers to the South as missionaries (1990, 27).

Race consciousness and strife aided the conception of Black Baptist Church organizations, called conventions. Towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, United States congressional activity caused the Black church to galvanize. “From 1890 to 1910 legislation was passed by all southern states which effectively disenfranchised African Americans and gave license to lynchings and other forms of racial suppression” (1990, 28). For the Black Baptists, it is highlighted, “The first step toward denominational structure was taken in 1814 with the formation of the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States of America for Foreign Missions” (1990, 23). There also existed a heart for overseas missions, even during this time. These authors add, “As early as 1815 the African Baptist Missionary Society of Richmond was organized by two black ministers, Collin Teague and Lott Carey, with the aid of a white deacon, William Crane. In 1821 Lott Carey became the first Black Baptist missionary to Africa” (1990, 45). There is a wealth of global missions’ history among the Black Baptist movement of the early 19th century. Lincoln and Mamiya continue, “Much of the Black Baptist missionary endeavors were limited to Liberia and the West Coast of Africa during the nineteenth century. In 1889 the Baptist Foreign Mission Convention published a magazine called *The African Missions*. During the twentieth century missionary efforts were extended to Central and South African countries” (1990, 45).²

² National Baptist.com. Missionary endeavors around the world is still growing in the National Baptist convention and according to their website they are intending to open several more stations in the coming year. According to their website, The National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc., are currently supporting 11 missions stations in Africa, the Caribbean, and Central America.

Pentecostalism, the youngest of this group, began forming around the turn of the 20th century. This movement is noted to have been interracial at its inception here in America. However, as Jacobsen insists, “Early Pentecostal theology cannot be discussed without examining the issue of race” (2003, 260). He acknowledges, “Multiracialism was part of the fabric of the movement, and it naturally tintured the rhetoric of many early Pentecostal theologians” (Jacobsen 2003, 260). The Azusa Street Mission is where the glossolalia phenomenon occurred and was experienced by people from all walks of life, whites, and blacks. Jacobsen writes, “The leaders of the mission believed that the egalitarian nature of the gospel required Pentecostalism to be anti-racist in faith and practice” (2003, 260). Jacobsen continues, “[W]ith time, and as the movement became more institutionalized, patterns of [pentecostal] organizations unfortunately tended to become more segregated” (2003, 261). The pattern in the Pentecostal divisions differed from that of the Methodist and Baptist because it was the white brothers who splintered away from the main body of the mixed congregation to form segregated groups.

For the trinitarian believers, the formation of the Assemblies of God was a breaking away from the African American leader Charles H. Mason’s Church of God in Christ organization. And according to Jacobsen, although the Oneness Pentecostal movement held the races together longer, they also experienced the White brothers breaking away from the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World to form the United Pentecostal Churches. “It is a sorry comment on white Pentecostalism that virtually no church leader or theologian considered the racial division of the movement an issue worthy of his or her serious and sustained theological reflection” (Jacobsen 2003, 262).

Once again, with the ugly underbelly of American racism infecting the church, the leaders of the Black Pentecostal movement established polity and orthodoxy. Furthermore, the main Black Pentecostal movements have established and maintained a global presence on each of the (inhabited) continents. According to their website, the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World have affiliate churches in 30 international dioceses and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) boast of having 63 countries where affiliate churches are established. Lincoln and Mamiya comment, “Throughout much of the twentieth century COGIC’S resources have been directed to domestic missionary work, especially in urban areas, building congregations from house churches and storefront churches to regular church edifices” (1990, 90). Ministry in their own Jerusalem is priority, however, there remains a commitment to taking the gospel to the world. As these authors also explicate, “Since the end of the civil rights period, COGIC has emphasized foreign missions in Africa and the Caribbean. According to recent studies, the fastest-growing sector of Christianity in African countries has consisted of African

independent church movements, which are usually Pentecostal in form” (1990, 90). This information suggests there has been and continues to be an international missionary presence among predominantly African American denominations.

Urban Ministry and its Domestic Missions Agenda

Now, it is imperative to consider the Black church’s inherent role as caretaker/guardian/advocate on the home front. This assignment includes the commitment to the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. Furthermore, this assignment – in the grand scheme of her role in the community – is the Black Church’s missiological calling. It encompasses a holistic approach of ministry, including socio/economic, political, and social engagement. When one considers the church’s role in any given society, the missiological construct is at the core of its very existence. To be clear, “in the early stages of the church, missions was more than a function; it was a fundamental expression of the life of the church” (Terry 2015, 6). The mission of the church has always been encapsulated by the Great Commission and Commandment. It is the missiological framework that presents the actions of the Great Commandment, the love of Christ on display in a tangible, impactful measure. Terry adds, “The missionary endeavors of the church have helped theology to a fuller understanding of its task by providing a much-needed corrective and a wider perspective for its thinking. Missiology and theology must be – ‘conjoined twins’ – in the theological curriculum; they are mutually interdependent” (2015, 7). In other words, do not just tell them about Jesus, show them His love in action. Therefore, in a land where racism has infected the hearts of many white Christians, the Black church has stood in the gap for her community, to be the place of healing, belonging, and acceptance. A place where the voices of the community are heard and appreciated.

Considering the journey of the Black Christian in America and the history of the institutionalized Black Church, it is no wonder many pastors have chosen to focus on the pressing needs in their community versus being more actively involved in foreign missions. However, there are a few points that must be considered. First, it should be mentioned that the African Methodist, the Black Baptist conventions, and the major Pentecostal movements, like the Church of God in Christ, provide missionary support through which their affiliate churches are able to provide financial support. Unlike independent churches, who sponsor their own missionaries, these organizations maintain their international presence through the collective, organizational support. With that being acknowledged, it is also reasonable to concur with Hopkins where she

asserts, “many African Americans who are called to ministry have prioritized the needs in their own communities, focusing on preaching the gospel or pursuing justice locally” (February 1, 2021). Furthermore, there continues to be an ever-pressing need for urban ministry to mobilize both their resources and their community engagement. This does not negate the need for global engagement through missions, but it does suggest that pastors of urban ministries are on the local mission field, unique to their surroundings.

Embodying the work of Christ requires that ministries are anointed to bring good news to the poor, comfort the brokenhearted, proclaim that captives will be released, and prisoners will be freed, and to tell those who mourn that the time of God’s favor has come. To all who mourn in Zion a crown of beauty for ashes, a joyous blessing instead of mourning, and festive praise instead of despair (Isa 61:1-3, NLT). The message of the urban church continues to address the social dilemma American society continues to perpetuate on the lives of its members as she – the urban church – pushes the message of hope that life in this nation can get better.

Police brutality, rampant poverty, violence, drug abuse, addictions, single parent (no parent) homes, are only a few of the myriad issues confronting the urban church. Ministries that can address these and many other social ills of today, with practical insight and tangible assistance, are the ministries that thrive in the urban centers of this nation. Home ownership programs, debt relief and financial freedom initiatives are areas of concern that garner attention. Encouraging the pursuit of higher education, which opens the door for good paying jobs, constitute social programming the Black Church has needed to (and still must) address.

In the ‘Land of the Free,’ it is necessary for the Black Church to engage in these types of endeavors to ensure their members have opportunities to pursue the American dream. Lincoln and Mamiya argue, “In spite of the harsh realities of the American racial dilemma, the majority of African Americans have desired to be part of the American dream and to share more equally the fruits of their singular contributions to this land of opportunity” (1990, 239). Because this nation has prided herself as being Christian, citizens of color – especially members of the Black church – have an obligation and the right to hold her (this nation’s) feet to the fire concerning how she deals with their community. Many pastors in the urban centers of this nation are products of the cultural environment where they serve. Therefore, it is needful for them to connect people to God based upon the unique Christian worldview from the African American perspective.

Robert C. Lawson's Writing and Impact

Bishop R. C. Lawson, a Oneness Pentecostal and founder of the Churches of Our Lord Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith, addressed the race issue head on. Jacobsen writes that he was, “the first person of the Pentecostal movement to address race with any degree of sustained theological attention” (2003, 263). Lawson’s anti-racist vision was one that clearly rose above his contemporaries. Jacobsen notes, “Lawson’s analysis and critique addressed virtually all of white Christianity and Christian-dominated Western culture, and his theological solution was, if anything, even more universal in scope and application” (2003, 263). It is chilling to hear the words of Lawson, penned in the 1920s, in the context of today’s climate. Per Jacobsen, “Lawson believed that racial prejudice was ‘the greatest enemy of humanity’” (2003, 265). Jacobsen contends, “[I]n Lawson’s own theology, brotherly love – mutual care and concern that treated people from all races the same – was a core value” (2003, 266). Lawson’s assessment of the Scriptures moved him to believe he must kill racism. He believed, “Most white people were so completely bound by prejudice in matters of race – ‘so biased to the Negro in every phase and department’ – that it was difficult to know where to begin” (Jacobsen 2003, 265). To understand the depths of the roots of racism in America, Lawson need look no further than the upbringing of white children.

Lawson explained that white boys and girls were taught from the earliest days of childhood to ‘look upon the darker races as inferior in both blood and in intellect,’ and that elementary school prejudice was then reinforced for the rest of their lives by the incessant drone of white ‘newspaper logic and propaganda,’ which insisted that black people always be portrayed in the worst light possible and whites in the best (Jacobsen 2003, 265).

As a student of the Scriptures, Lawson surmised, the best place to gain traction against the poisonous venom of racism would be in the church, after all, the church is the one place the Bible is taught as the infallible word of a loving God. Jacobsen observes that in Lawson’s view, “the churches were supposed to be committed to ‘the high Christian idealism of the ‘Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of all men’” (2003, 265). Much to Lawson’s dismay, the white churches were just as guilty of the racism of the day and were totally locked into its logic. This left him to wonder “how white Christians could so easily ignore Jesus’s command to love others in the same way they loved themselves” (Jacobsen 2003, 265).

The devastating effect of the rise of racial hatred grew immensely and the impact was devastating the world evangelism scene. In a scathing, yet telling critique of the circumstances, Lawson writes, “Largely because of color prejudice the Christian missionary movement is at a standstill in India, China, Japan, and Africa Indeed, it appears that Africa is destined to become a great Mohammedan empire. He further explained, “the darker races have reached a point where they will not kindly accept a gospel of love and brotherhood when the denial of their essential manhood by Christian [sic] people negative [sic] the tenets which they are asked to accept” (Jacobsen 2003, 266). The Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, the foundation upon which Lawson promoted his cause, had been popularized in European and American churches by a series of lectures from a well-known theologian by the name of Adolph Harnack. The Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, writes Jacobsen, “had been part of the African-American Christianity from its very beginning” (2003, 266). In fact, it was upon this premise that the first African American denomination (the African Methodist Episcopal Church) was birthed, in the early 1800s.

Lawson was hopeful that his Pentecostal movement would succeed where other denominations had failed. He believed a genuine Pentecostal experience was powerful to transform men’s hearts into the image of a loving Christ. Lawson writes,

We thought for sure that wherein the other churches had failed upon the issue of the ‘color line’ and had divided into race and national groups, for instance colored and white Baptist and Methodist churches, etc. Welsh Presbyterian Church, German Lutheran Church, etc. that the [Pentecostal] people would teach to these a wonderful lesson by example in showing that the true people of God are one regardless of what nationality or race they may belong; by abiding together in the bonds of fellowship, love, and organization, thus bringing on them the blessings recorded in the 133rd Psalm...We trusted that the Pentecostal people would rise to redeem man by example and precept (Jacobsen 2003, 267).

Lawson’s hopes were dashed, and the Pentecostal movement became infected with the same venom of racism which plagued the other groups. The contributions of R. C. Lawson to the discussion of racism and the church in America are invaluable, still holding true today. Jacobsen declares, “[L]ike William Seymour and the other leaders of the Azusa Street Mission, Lawson believed that people whose lives were filled with racial hatred could not possibly be filled with the Spirit” (Jacobsen 2003, 267). Incongruity of Biblical theology and Christian praxis befuddled Lawson.

Conclusion

What gospel is being presented by missionaries who are infected with the hatred of racism? How can White, racist Christians possibly fulfill the Great Commandment while harboring hatred towards people of color? Furthermore, how is White Evangelicalism addressing these issues today? Where are the voices “crying out in the wilderness” of racial prejudice? How are the missiological pursuits of the church impacted today?

Perhaps the best way to summarize these thoughts is by offering a plan for the missiological networks to consider. First, the major denominations from the majority side must be willing to seek reconciliation by collectively offering a scathing rebuke of their forefathers misplaced racist mentality, and for their missing the opportunity to stand with their African American brothers and sisters. Secondly, the missions’ departments from these groups should begin to coordinate cooperative efforts that tear down walls and begin to build bridges. Leadership from all groups must be willing to make a concerted effort to bring an end to the divide that is not representative of the unity Christ prayed for concerning His Church.

The Universal Church is called to fulfill the Great Commission by loving and serving others as Christ did (and does) by example. The failure of American Christianity is that it has been split along racial lines. This article has explored and uncovered a troubling past. A past which includes a history of racial division – prompted by the maltreatment of African American believers – which gave rise to denominational splits along racial lines. The Black Church movement, across denominations, determined their missiological pursuits were their response to the Great Commission, regardless of the mistreatment to which they were subjected in the States. And their history confirms a steady presence in missions work in third world countries down through the years.

Finally, the apostle Paul suggested that he was willing to become all things to all people so that he could win some of those people to Christ (1 Cor 9:22). Is it possible that the Evangelical Church and the Black Church can learn to look through the lenses of one another’s perspectives in order that others may be won to Christ? I wonder.

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