

THE BLACK CHURCH - A MYSTERY WITHIN A MYSTERY

Ephesians 5:32 This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.

Introduction

The church is a mystery. It is a mystery why Christ would come to this sin-cursed world and die a cruel death to provide us with eternal salvation. It is a mystery why Jesus would leave this important work of spreading the gospel to highly favored, yet flawed individuals. It is a mystery why some of the most talented individuals have tainted character. The simple answer is because God loves us. This does not solve the mystery; it just kicks the proverbial can farther down the road. We still don't know why He loves us. Only God knows the final answer to this ontological puzzle. We just need to accept the mystery and live as God wants us to live. Andre' Crouch expressed the benefit of this mystery in one of his songs. "I don't know why Jesus loves me. I don't why He cares. I don't know why He sacrificed His life. Oh, but I'm glad, so glad He did." I say again, as Apostle Paul said, the church is a great, beautiful mystery.

The Bible has many figures of speech to describe the mystery of the church. Each metaphor emphasizes a particular aspect of the church. Sometimes, we are called a family; sometimes, we are called a flock of sheep; and sometimes, we are called an army fighting evil. Sometimes, we are called a human body with members or organs working in synch. We are called a building with Christ as the chief corner stone. We are even called the bride of Christ.

The church is a mystery, and the Black church is a mystery within a mystery. It has been called the oasis in a desert of hatred, injustice, and racism. It has been called the backbone of our culture. The great theologian and preacher, Howard Thurman, while preaching at a Founders' Day Convocation at Morehouse College, said in his introduction that he was glad to be the keynote speaker at his "second" Alma Mater. He emphasized the word "second." Everyone present was stunned in amazement, because everyone knew he was a Morehouse *alumnus*. As was his style, he paused for a few seconds to add to the suspense. He was known for his powerful pauses. Then he explained. Alma Mater literally means nourishing mother. It is the institution that nourished you like your own biological mother. He further explained that he was proud to be a Morehouse Man, but his home church, Mount Bethel Baptist Church, in the Waycross Community in Daytona Beach, Florida, was his first Alma Mater. That Black church, which held church too long, was somewhat disorganized, had too many Sunday afternoon services, and too many repasts and pot luck dinners, prepared him for his

second Alma Mater, Morehouse College. Then, he told everybody to take a minute or two and reminisce about the church of their childhood. In about thirty seconds, the audience broke out in thunderous applause and a cascade of Amens. Howard Thurman's introductory statements and our response reminded us how indispensable the church was and is to our survival and our advancement in this hostile, evil society.

Jesus said the gates of hell would not prevail against the church. The Black church is proof positive that the words of Jesus are true. Antioch-Lithonia Missionary Baptist Church has prevailed for one hundred fifty-six years. I believe Antioch will be here when Jesus returns to rapture us up into the Church Triumphant.

God can always pull good out of bad situations. The Black church emerged because we were not allowed to worship with the people in power - that's putting it mildly. It developed in a unique way - not better than others, just unique. We worship differently. We usher differently. We sing differently. We preach differently. It was common for the preacher to close the sermon with a rhythmical "hoop." The Black church is truly a mystery within a mystery. Let's look at a few of the attributes and accomplishments of Antioch-Lithonia and the many other Black churches in America.

Exposition

1. A Source Of Hope And Healing.

(In Church, People Sang Positive Spirituals.)

(Outside Of The Church, People Sang The Blues.)

(The Emotional Releases During Worship Were Therapeutic.)

2. A Sense Of Personhood And Dignity.

(Church Was The Only Place Where Every Black Person Received Respect.)

(In Church, No One Called A Grown Man A Boy.)

(In Church, No One Called A Grown Woman A Girl or A Gal.)

(Derogatory Terms And Labels Were Taboo.)

(Everybody In Church Had A Title To Show And Receive Respect: Brother, Sister, Mother, Deacon, Reverend, Minister, Pastor, President, Etc.)

3. A Stimulus For Activism And Education.

(Many Young People Learned Leadership And Speaking Skills While Working In The Church.)

(The Church Started Schools, Colleges.)

(The Church Gave Birth To The Civil Rights Movement.)

Closing Statements

It is good to study history. It is also good to make history. Antioch-Lithonia, you may not realize it, but you are making history in so many marvelous ways. I will close with the last stanza of our *Heritage Hymn*.

“The work is not completed,
Some tasks have just begun.
New members will be added,
New music will be sung.
Our God is always faithful,
His promises true.
His spirit is here to guide us,
Our God will see us through.
Upon the Rock of Ages,
We build a better place.
Amen!”

Give God Glory! Give God All The Glory!

End Note

The anthem of the civil rights movement was birthed by the people of the Black church. ***We Shall Overcome***, is a synthesis of the spiritual ***I'll Be Alright*** and C. A. Tindley's hymn, ***I'll Overcome Someday***. The melody is that of the spiritual, and the lyrics a variation on Tindley's text. A side-by-side comparison of the two stanzas is instructive:

"I'll overcome someday. / We shall overcome

I'll overcome some day, / We shall overcome

I'll overcome some day; / We shall overcome someday.

If in my heart I do not yield / If in our hearts we do believe

I'll overcome some day. / We shall overcome someday."

Even though the first person singular personal pronoun "I" was traditionally considered "communal" in Black culture, the creators of the civil rights songs always used the first person plural pronouns – "we" and "our." The collective language of these protest songs was intended to foster a sense of community as the protesters sought to act as one collective body.

Copyright © by James C. Ward

All Rights Reserved