

Wanted: Black Reformed Churches That Radicalize Beyond Regurgitation

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The late Dr. Harvie Conn, Professor of Missions at Westminster Theological Seminary, from 1972 to 1998, writes, "theology must be culture-specific in recognition of the receptor-oriented character of divine revelation." The condescension of God in communicating to his people through the Scriptures and the very example of Jesus' incarnation paint a glaring assessment of how pathetic it is for a Black preacher/teacher to stand in front of an audience of Black folks and speak to them as if he is wearing a white powdered wig and they are a group of New England Puritans.

The Black regurgitation preacher/teacher does not apply Reformed theology to issues specific to Black communities here and now. Instead, he simply regurgitates the same categories, issues, problems and polemics of a predominantly White evangelical culture that, in many ways, are foreign to the Black folks to whom he is speaking. Of course, some issues like the national epidemic of passive men transcend all neighborhoods in America, while others do not.

Theologizing, writes Conn, is dialogical in character. It is a dialogue not only within the household of faith but also with the world in which it is being applied—the culture, the religion, the politics, the economics and the social systems.

Regurgitation preachers reconfigure conversion as the art of converting Black folk to Reformed historical theology and its polemics and not converting souls to union with Christ and His kingdom here and now. A believer's union with Christ, rightly understood through the doctrines of grace is not an end; it's a liberating beginning (Eph 2:8-10). Our union with Christ is the means to spirit-filled, redemptive mission as members of the kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God is a central theme in the preaching of Jesus and by extension, the preaching and teaching of the apostles. Many Black Reformed preachers/teachers, while having great passion for doctrine and being "right", often forsake the forest for the trees and lose the full implications of the gospel for local Black culture. A radical Black Reformed theology orients all of one's life toward the kingdom (Matt 6:33) and ignites Jesus followers into radical living here and now.

George Ladd rightly stresses the importance of the kingdom this way:

"The kingdom of God is the redemptive reign of God dynamically active to establish his rule among men and that this Kingdom, which will appear as an apocalyptic act at the end of the age, has already come into human history in the person and mission of Jesus to

overcome evil, to deliver men from its power and to bring them into the blessings of God's reign. The Kingdom involves two great moments: fulfillment within history and consummation at the end of history."

The kingdom implies more than the salvation of individuals, the reign of God in people's hearts or the Reformed church. It means nothing less than the reign of God over His entire created universe. Colossians 1:9-23 reminds us that Jesus as Lord rescues people from darkness, brings them into the Kingdom (vs. 13), confirms his Lordship over all creation (vs. 15-17), establishes his role as sole head of the Church (vs. 18), announces his work to reconcile all things in heaven and earth (vs. 20), and pronounces victory for his people in the great battle between kingdom of darkness and the Kingdom of God's son (vs. 21-23) first announced in Gen 3:15.

The doctrines of grace are intended to lead to personal transformation and social action in the Kingdom of God as God's redemptive agents in the progressive redemptive story. Theological understanding should lead to radical manifestations of living as salt and light, while dealing with personal and social issues (Matt. 5:13-17).

Black churches that get drunk on regurgitating the theological formulas of modernist controversies or battles of past generations are simply not radical enough. They can create new ghettos: Black and Reformed ones disconnected from actual issues in Black communities here and now. A Black Reformed radical church adapts and reforms absolutely everything it does in preaching, teaching, worship, discipleship, community service, social justice activity and the like, in order to engage the Black experience among non-Christians in their communities. It's Reformed and always reforming folk into local mission as agents of the Holy Ghost-filled redemptive activities of God.

We do not simply want Black converts to Reformed theology but Black Reformed churches that are on a mission to apply the doctrines of grace to the particular spiritual, personal, social, cultural and economic issues in the various striations of the Black community.

Here are a few traits of radicalized Black Reformed churches:

(1) Radical Black Reformed churches engage, explore, enter and re-caste the Black experience in America with the gospel of grace and the redemptive mission of the Kingdom. As Conn writes, "contextualization is a covenant activity". In radical Black Reformed churches, preaching/teaching "becomes more than effective communication of the content of the gospel in cultural context; it becomes the process or the covenant conscientization of the whole people of God to the hermeneutical obligations of the gospel," says Conn.

In Black Reformed regurgitation churches, there is no contextualization, but rather a resting in the "rightness" of "our" position against other Christians (like charismatics, Pelagians, and Arminians). Theology without the radical and missional activity of the Kingdom will not bear fruit. In radical Black Reformed churches, preaching and teaching

will also always assume the presence of broken, hurting, unchurched and skeptical people and should engage present realities of the Satan-infected aspects of their stories, not simply reliving the issues of the Reformation or American fundamentalism, for example.

To engage the Black experience means that radical Black Reformed pastors are preaching/teaching the Kingdom's doctrines of grace as a means of showing genuine interest and deep affiliation with Black literature, music (hip hop, jazz, the spirituals and the blues), theater, in light of present day fears, narratives, dreams, nightmares, heroes and heroines, pain, oppression and so on of the actual Black folks in the pews (not the ones they wish they had).

What is needed is radical Black Reformed preaching/teaching that interprets reality through the redemptive lens of Jesus, the present reigning King who pursues the liberation of men and women from sin, idolatry and the perversion of God's good created order in order to make the Black community and the rest of the world what God intends.

(2) Radical Black Reformed Churches preach and teach in the vernacular language of the people. Regurgitation churches have an insider language that if you don't speak you are not allowed into fellowship. Regurgitation churches encourage the application of many categories, paradigms and issues randomly to a Black context that may not apply (yet).

Radical Black folk's preaching and teaching explains technical terms and concepts and immediately applies them to the Black experience. There is no anti-Kingdom obsession with "us," the right Christians, versus "them," the wrong Christians. Radical Black Reformed preaching/teaching is known for its authenticity and humility, always expecting and assuming unchurched and non-Christians are present. Finally, the preaching and teaching is not watered-down but is intentionally in the vernacular of the Black folks to whom you are speaking so that they understand and can apply it to their lives because God has always communicated to people in vernacular language that humans can understand.

(3) Radical Black Reformed Churches create and inspire Christian communities that are involved in local neighborhood mission. This is what the Black church has been about since the plantation churches were first formed. Regurgitation churches however, train people in theology and the practice of a privatized, individualistic, pietistic Christianity with no social consciousness, almost seeming to care less about the issues plaguing Black communities that need immediate attention--like the crisis in masculinity, matriarchalism, abortion, materialism, the glamorization of immorality, homosexuality, sub-standard education, urban pollution, victimology, dealing with racism, HIV/AIDS, tensions with Hispanics and so on. Regurgitation sees no value in bringing the Kingdom to non-Christians in their local neighborhood that pursues the way of love, redemption, healing, liberation and hope. Regurgitation often pursues the darkness of ridicule and rejection.

Radical Black Reformed churches ignite lay people to engage the renewing and transforming of local neighborhoods through Christians in their vocations as kingdom-oriented followers of Christ fueled by the liberating doctrines of grace.

(4) Radical Black Reformed Churches pursue unity with other Christians whenever possible on local levels so that Reformed theology is influencing churches at large. Radical Black Reformed pastors align themselves with Jesus' teaching about the unity of believers (John 17) joined for common mission as a starting point for joining other Christians in the great battle within their neighborhood, between the kingdom of darkness and the Kingdom of God's son. We align with other Christians that share many, but not with all of our convictions for the greater goal of affecting our local neighborhoods with the work and person of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Anthony Carter brilliantly says, "African-American Christians should be assured that their experience is not a stumbling block to embracing the truths of the Reformation, but rather a stepping-stone." Black Reformed churches will become useless to Black communities if that theological stepping-stone becomes Mt. Zion. Of course Reformed historical theology is important. In fact, it's vital and necessary for Reformed identity. But only through radical contextualization and application of the doctrine to issues in Black communities can Reformed theology have the impact many of us desire. Radicalism, not regurgitation, will create a new legacy for the Black Reformed movement in America in the 21st century."

RESOURCES: *On Being Black and Reformed*, by Anthony Carter; *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds*, Harvie Conn; *Black Theology in Dialogue*, J. Deotis Roberts; *The Bible and the Future*, Anthony Hoekema; "The Missional Church," by Tim Keller.

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