**Black History Is Church History**

**A Sermon By Micah Bournes**

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I want to begin with a bold claim. In the context of North American Christianity, from the time of the puritans to now, the Black Church, and those who align themselves with it, has been the only faithful expression of Christian community on this land.

I went to a predominately white Bible college, and when we were studying the history of Christianity in North America, we were studying primarily pastors, theologians, and evangelists in the white Church tradition. We were made to believe that these men were the protectors of orthodox, Biblical Christianity. And although many of them had hypocritical and prejudice views on race, we were reminded that no one has perfect theology, and everyone can be blinded by the prevailing thought of their time.

One of many examples is the Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards.

I remember being in bible college reading an expert from Jonathan Edward’s journal, when he was a young preacher wrestling with the question of slavery. But the question was not whether or not slavery was right or wrong. The question was, whether or not African slaves had souls. Because as a preacher, if they had souls, it was his responsibility to preach to them, but if they were just animals, as many white people believed, there was no use in preaching to a cow or a chicken or a pig. Now, to his credit, he eventually decided we did indeed have souls. And his conclusion was, it was fine to have slaves, as long as you Christianized them. Not only did Jonathan Edwards defend slavery, he participated in it till the day he died. It is on record that he purchased a 14 year old African girl named Venus. And responding to criticism by abolitionists condemning slave holding church leaders like himself, this is what Edwards had to say in his “Draft Letter on Slavery”

“The [abolitionist] argument, if it carries anything, implies that we ought not to be partakers, neither immediately nor remotely. We ought not to be partakers at all... Reproaching their pastor as though he lived in notorious iniquity and indulgence of his lusts...For if they still continue to cry out against those who keep negro slaves as partakers of injustice in making them slaves, and continue still themselves notwithstanding to be partakers of their slavery, let them own that their objections are not conscientious, but merely to make difficulty and trouble for their neighbors. There is no action without circumstance. But circumstances are included in the very word. Killing a man is not in itself unlawful, but murder is in itself unlawful. So taking away from our neighbor is not in itself unlawful, in itself reasonable or unreasonable.”

Essentially his argument was that slavery was fine as long as you treated your slaves nice, as long as you were a reasonable slave master.

This is a man that I was taught to see as a hero in the faith. An imperfect one, but a hero nonetheless. One commentator from PostBarthian.Com said this

**“Jonathan Edwards was an outstanding theologian and a racist**. He never repented of his racism, and his zeal for Christianity reenforced his racism towards Africans, Native Americans and other people he deemed inferior. I understand why many people are unwilling to study Edwards at all due to his racism. However, if we are to study sinless theologians, then there will be no theologians left in the history of the world, because virtually every great theologian has disqualifying sin.”

Now, I agree that no one in sinless, but there is a difference between making mistakes and habitually participating in and defending great injustice. I agree no one has perfect theology, but how wrong are you allowed to be about something of such great consequence and still be considered an “outstanding theologian”? We cannot have compassion on him as a victim of the thought of his day because clearly, he was responding to opposition in his day by the faithful Black church, and white Christians who aligned themselves with that faithful Black remnant of believers.

Jonathan Edwards is studied in nearly every course about Church history in North America, but are men like him really the history of the true Church? Is this not the history of Christian Idolatry? The history of the vile affair between white religion and white political power brought together by white greed and white supremacy. Edwards is important in American history, but if you want to see the history of the followers of Christ, you MUST look to the Black Church. People like Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King are names typically associated with Black history. But for believers of any color, Black History is Church History. Black History is the history of the faithful remnant. The followers of Jesus who have persistently throughout generations fought back against injustice in the name of Christ.

The Civil Rights Movement is studied as a political movement, but it was a spiritual revival. Dr. King was calling the nation and the idolatrous white church to repentance. The organization that drew the blueprints for so many of the demonstrations and activity of the Civil Rights Movement was called The Southern Christian Leadership Conference. It was comprised primarily of Black Church leaders and those who aligned themselves with the Black Church. They believed it was their Christian duty to fight racism. The I have a dream “speech” is actually a sermon. Reverend King quoted the prophet Amos when he says “Let justice roll like a mighty river”. Amos was also rebuking hypocritical religion of his day. He lived among a people who fancied themselves chosen and blessed by God and yet turned away from the needy begging at the city gates. The wealthy were gluttonous while the poor were dying of starvation. But the nation still participated in meaningless religious ceremony. Amos says in on behalf of an angry God (Amos Chapter 5)

“I hate, I despise your feasts. I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me burnt offerings and grain offerings I will not accept them… Take away from me the noise of your songs, to the melody of your harps I will not listen, But let justice roll down like a mighty river”…

Let justice flood your sanctuaries, and destroy all your empty religion. This is what Dr. King was echoing. The Black Church has been the prophetic voice. The faithful remnant challenging the powers that be. Black History Is Church History.

Returning to the times of slavery, we’ve heard what Jonathan Edwards had to say about the issue. But Frederick Douglass was a Black man who was born into slavery, escaped from it, became an abolitionist and an ordained Minister in the African Methodists Episcopal Church. He was also a fearless critic of white Christian idolatry. According to Douglass, the North American expression of white religion ought not be called Christianity at all. Douglass explains…

“What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the slaveholding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference, so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, impartial Christianity of Christ. I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds and the grossest of all libels. Never was there a clearer case of stealing the livery of the court of heaven to serve the devil in. I am filled with unutterable loathing when I contemplate the religious pomp and show, together with the horrible inconsistencies which everywhere surround me. We have men stealers for ministers, women whippers for missionaries, and cradle plunderers for church members. The man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus. The man who robs me of my earnings at the end of each week meets me as a class leader on Sunday morning, to show me the way of life and the path of salvation. He who sells my sister for purposes of prostitution, stands forth as the pious advocate of purity. The dealers in the bodies and souls of men erect their stand in the presence of the pulpit, and they mutually help each other. The dealer gives his blood-stained gold to support the pulpit, and the pulpit, in return, covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity.”

Now you tell me, between Jonathan Edwards’ defense of slave-holding Church leaders, and Frederick Douglass’ critique of the same, which one sounds more like Amos’ prophetic cry? Which one do you consider to be the legacy of Jesus Christ? Which one seems to be the history of the people of God? Black History Is Church History, and in our North American context, both historically and today, only those who align themselves with the work of the Black Church, only those who sacrifice and suffer with the Black community can honestly call themselves followers of Christ.

This is not an elevation of the importance of Blackness. It is a consideration of what it means to be a Christian in our day and time. A Christian is a person who is committed to freedom! Which means, whenever they see oppression, they are drawn to stand with and fight on behalf of the suffering.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Pastor who stood against Hitler and the Nazis said “Only those who cry out for the Jews can sing Gregorian chant.” Gregorian chant is a particular style of worship in the German Church. In his context, he was saying, you cannot honestly worship God unless you are standing with the oppressed, unless you are fighting for Jews to be free!

Which brings us to the scripture passage of today, Mark Chapter 8 verse 31. But in the passage right before verse 31, Jesus asks his disciples who they believed he was, and Peter proclaims with joy, “YOU ARE THE CHRIST!” The anointed one, the chosen one of God! And Peter was absolutely right. But the very next thing Jesus says, after establishing that he is the anointed one of God, is this…

“Jesus began to teach them that he must suffer many things and be rejected… (By Who? By the hypocritical religious establishment!)… rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed.” Jesus was killed by the state, by the Roman empire, but his crucifixion was instigated by wayward religion. It was once again corrupt religion in bed with corrupt political power that lead to the oppression and murder of the chosen of God.

If you are to identify yourself with Christ, the chosen of God, then you will suffer like Christ, the chosen of God. And you must algin yourself with those who suffer, with the oppressed, whom are also the chosen of God. And if you are for the oppressed, then you must be proactively against any religious establishment and government that oppresses and murders the chosen of God.

I want to end with wisdom from a more recently deceased voice in Black History, in Church History, the Black American theologian James Cone. Cone says, “To know God is to know God’s work of liberation, an emancipation form death-dealing political, economic, and social structures of society. This is the essence of biblical revelation. There is no revelation of God without a condition of oppression which develops into a situation of liberation. Revelation is only for the oppressed of the land. God comes to those who have been enslaved and abused and declares total identification with their situation. Disclosing to them the rightness of their emancipation on their own terms.”

Cone says “ Revelation is only for the oppressed of the land!” If you want the revelation of God, you must be in proximity to the oppressed of the land. You must sit at their feet, you must wash their feet, you must march with them in their quest for freedom.

Christ says in Mark chapter 8, that he, the chosen of God, must suffer. Christ says in verse 34 of that same chapter that anyone who considers themselves the people of God must also suffer. “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul.”

True Christian history, is the stories of those who picked up their cross and followed Christ. Where is Christ going? He’s going to the oppressed, He is going to set them free, which means he’s going to pick a fight with the oppressors. The oppressors throughout generations have consistently been members of the unholy alliance between wayward religion and corrupt political power. Which is why in times of corruption, like the one in which we live, in order to be faithful to God, you have to be willing to be antagonistic against both the Church and the Government. And when you do so, you are inevitably putting a target on your back. You are inviting suffering when you challenge that type of power.

Cone says “To speak of God, and God’s participation in the liberation of the oppressed of the land is a risky venture in any society. But if the society is racist and also uses God-language as an instrument to further the cause of human humiliation, then the task of authentic theological speech is even more dangerous and difficult. It is dangerous because the true prophet of the gospel of God must become both anti-Christian and unpatriotic. It is impossible to confront a racist society without at the same time challenging the very existence of the national structure and all its institutions, especially the established churches. All national institutions represent the interest of society as a whole. We live in a nation which is committed to the perpetuation of white supremacy, and it will try to exterminate all who fail to support this ideal.”

To stand with the oppressed is to invite the wrath of the oppressor, is to invite suffering. We have to be aware of this. But we also have to be careful. James Cone makes an important distinction to prevent us from slipping into misguided theology that praises suffering, instead of theology that seeks to eradicate suffering.

Cone explains “The Black prophet is a rebel with a cause, the cause of over twenty-five million American blacks and all oppressed people everywhere. It is God’s cause because God has chosen the blacks as God’s own people. And God has chosen them not for redemptive suffering but for freedom. Blacks are not elected to be Yahweh’s suffering people. Rather we are elected because we are oppressed against our will and God’s, and God has decided to make our liberation God’s own undertaking. We are elected to be free now to do the work for which we are called into being, namely the breaking of chains.”

In the North American context, Black History is Church History because Black History is a story of a people fighting to be free, and for those of true Christian faith, we know that freedom is God’s work. The people of God ought to be drawn to any and every movement for freedom. We are not called to suffer. We are called to eradicate suffering, but we know we will suffer in that pursuit. This suffering is unavoidable if you wish to remain faithful. But if you would rather remain privileged, and comfortable, and wealthy, and full, and uninvolved, I ask you, what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his very soul?