

A Sermon on the State of the 21st Century African and African American Church

By

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This is a sermon on the State of the African and African American Church Worldwide. It addresses the challenges and opportunities faced by these church with respect to carrying out the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20).

This sermon was delivered before the Mount Olivet Mission of Hope, Inc. (MOMOH, Inc.) and the Christian Awareness Mission of Hope (CAMOH) Conference on May 22, 2021 at Montgomery, Alabama. This paper is different from the actual oral presentation of the sermon; however, the general order and format of the ideas set forth in this paper is an accurate representation of the sermon itself. Your comments are welcome and should be sent to admin@methodistlawcentre.com.

I. Salutations to the Church

I would like to extend a Special and Heartfelt thanks to:

Rev. Olivett Johnson;
Dr. Judy C. Johnson;
Rev. Helen-Johnson-Ford; and,
Rev. O.J. Johnson.

I am especially pleased to be a part of this conference, because it is a family-oriented Christian Conference. I feel very blessed and very fortunate that God has blessed me to be a part of the Johnson family.

My own personal theology is that God had ordained the Family as the First Church. Indeed, the first Passover was discharged within the Home as a family ritual. Throughout the Bible, God blesses us through the institution of the Family; and, Family Worship is the most important from of worship within the Church....

II. Opening Prayer

Let us now bow our head for a word of prayer...

Precious Heavenly Father. We thank you for this hour of Holy power! We thank

you for this special privilege of hearing God's word. May your Holy Words enlighten us, guide us and inspire us. In Jesus's name. Amen!

III. Introduction to Sermon and Thesis

The title of this Conference is called the "Lighthouse Conference."

Its Focus Scripture is Matthew 5:15-16: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

But I would like to supplement this Scripture, with some additional scriptures that facilitate the Great Commission of Christ (Matthew 28:19-20), to wit:

"For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish." -- Luke 14:28-30.

"And Jesus said unto him, No **man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.**" -- Luke 9:62

Thus building upon that focus scripture: the Theme of my sermon today is: "Carrying on the Great Commission of Christ in the 21st Century Black Church"

"Carrying on the Great Commission of Christ in the 21st Century Black Church."

That **GREAT COMMISSION** is stated in Matthew 28:19-20:

"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen."

But O How Great is that need for the discharge of that Great Commission to our brothers and sisters of Darker World-- Peoples of Africa and African Americans!

Today, within the African and African American church, we must not only

address issues of secularism, but we in the Black Church must also face:

- A. Racism
- B. Poverty and Inequality
- C. Injustice in the Courts
- D. Sexism and the Marginalization of the Vulnerable Women
- E. Police Brutality, Incarceration, and the suppression of Black men
- F. The steady deterioration of the Nuclear Family Structure
- G. Same-Sex Marriage and LGTB Ordinations within the Church

But—to God be the Glory!-- I believe that the Black Church of the 21st Century is being called upon to Lead and to Rebuild the Orthodox Church worldwide.

Like the Patriarch Noah in the Old Testament, who was called by God to build the “Ark” of faith, the African and African American Church worldwide is being called to spiritual leadership of the entire Christian Church—Protestant, Orthodox, Non-Denominational, and Catholic—worldwide!

The steady growth of the Orthodox Christian Faith in Africa has increased exponentially worldwide since 1970!

According to a Wikipedia article, **“Christianity in Africa”**:

As of 2021, there are 685 million Christians on the continent of Africa. And it is expected that there will be 760 million by the year 2025. This is the most of any other continent in the world.

Latin America has the next largest number at 601 million Christians.

Europe has the third largest number at 571 million Christians.

Indeed, within the Worldwide Anglican Communion, there are more Anglicans in Kenya than in the United Kingdom—not to mention the Anglicans that are in Nigeria, Uganda, and Southern Africa. These African Churches are keeping the flames of Orthodox Christianity alive within the Church of England.

In the United States, the Protestant Episcopal Church (which is led by an African American primate Michael Curry) is currently on suspension by the Archbishop of Canterbury for authorizing same-sex marriage—a practice that is still not sanctioned by the worldwide Anglican communion.

The same is true within the worldwide United Methodist Church—where the question of human sexuality and same-sex marriage has ripped apart the Methodist faithful.

In the year 2019, the North American contingent within United Methodist Church (UMC) was outvoted by the African contingent on the question of same-sex marriage and ordinations of openly gay clergy—that is, Methodists from the continent of Africa—voted to disallow such practices within the United Methodist Church.

Interesting to note, that in both cases—that is, the Worldwide Anglican Communion and in the United Methodist Churches—the orthodox African Christian community has been keeping alive the true integrity of the *Holy Bible* on perhaps the most important doctrine of the Christian faith: **that doctrine of marriage and family.**

And, finally, in the Presbyterian Church of Scotland—a church that was founded by the great 16th century Protestant theologian and clergymen John Knox, a student of the great Protestant Reformer John Calvin—has recently stated, just this month (May 2021) that it is considering removing the words “husband” and “wife” from its marriage vows!

But in the United States, the Great Commission of Christ, that is before the Black Church of the 21st Century, is much more vast and deeper and richer than the current problems that is plaguing mainstream white churches. TM

But in the Black Church, we still must address not only the very same issues that are impacting the Church in general, but we must also address all of the social ills that come with having reduced the Black Population to 244 years of chattel slavery; and then subjecting them to official racial segregation and suppression for another 100 years; together with all of the social and psychological pathologies that come with White Supremacy!

The challenges facing the Black Church of the 21st Century is much more immense.

I believe that the Black Church is being called—together with our African brothers and sisters on the African continent—to save the soul of the Nation and the world.

And **“Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.”** (Psalm 68.31).

I believe that like Noah who built the Ark, **The Black Church** is being called to re-build the Church worldwide upon its proper spiritual foundations.

The Bible says in *Genesis*, Chapter 6:11 – **“The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence.”**

In *Genesis* Chapter 6:8 **“But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD....”**

And in *Genesis*, Chapter 7:1, **“And the Lord said unto Noah, Come thou and all they house into the ark; for thee have I seen righteousness before me in this generation.”**

Brothers and Sisters—like Noah who tasked with building an Ark of Safety—this is where the Black Church is in this Generation. We must build the Black Church (and in the process help to save the souls of the White Church, Nation and the World).

IV. Legal Education at the Close of the Twentieth Century

In law school, during the early 1990s, while influenced by the voluminous writings of by Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, such as “The Souls of Black Folk,” “The Talented Tenth” and the “Negro Church,” and Dr. Charles Hamilton Houston “The Need for Negro Lawyers,” I began to conceptualize a radical new role for the Black Church and the Black Pastor, working hand-in-glove, with Black Lawyers, in leading the Black Church in discharging its Great Commission.

On the one hand, I saw the Black Church and the Bible at the most basic level of human existence, meeting the unmet spiritual needs of the Black Poor--- but, at the same time, but at the same time, I saw the Black Church being separated and divorced from:

A. The highest-quality of Black Scholarship on the Social and Economic Problems facing the African American Community, as I had come to know that problem through the lens of great men and women such as Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, Zora Neale Hurston, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

B. The highest-quality Legal Scholarship and Advocacy on the systematic miscarriages of justice in American courtrooms, as set forth by great African American legal scholars and practitioners such as Dr. Charles Hamilton Houston, Derrick Bell, and Kimberly Williams Crenshaw.

And so, I became submersed in Three Great Traditions from within the African American Experience—the Black Church; the Black College; and the Civil Rights Movement.

All three traditions play a significant role in the carrying out the Great Commission of Jesus Christ (Matt. 28:19-20.)

First, was the religious experience of the Black Church:

I grew up in rural Northern Florida

My religious experience was blessed and ennobled by unlettered Rural and Country Black Folk in rural Northern Florida and Southern Georgia.

It was dominated by great Black Preaching, Teaching, and Singing.

Our First Order of Business was to “Know Jesus” and “Get Religion” and “Be Born Again.”

The Gospel of John dominated our religious experience.

John 3: 1-3 was preached with a fierce “Indispensability” and a fierce urgency of “Now”:

“Jesus answered [Nicodemus] and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

It was a wonderful rural African American religious experience that emphasized inner righteousness, inner holiness, and the upbuilding of inner character, as taught by Christ in Matthew 15:18-20:

But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from

the heart; and they defile the man.

For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies:

These are the things which defile a man: but to eat with unwashed hands defileth not a man.

It was a blessed and wonderful African American religious experience dominated by the Preaching of Great Apostle to the Gentiles, St. Paul who said in Romans 12:2:

“And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what *is* that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”

It was a wonderful religious experience—growing up in Hopewell Baptist Church in Ft. Union Florida, and in Bethelhem AME Church in McAlpin, Florida—one that was blessed with great local gospel musicians such as the late Sister Inez Snead and further facilitated by visitations to our region by groups such as the Mighty Clouds of Joy and Gospel Great Shirley Caesar.

V. Black Scholarship and Science

But then, like hundreds of thousands of other African Americans who had been nourished in this great Black Church tradition, I was, during the next phase of my life, exposed to the Historically Black College & University:

“And so, within me—within my soul—existed, and persisted—two Great Black intellectual traditions—that of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as exemplified by the historic Black Church; and that of the Greek Academy, as exemplified by the HBCU....”

Somehow, Popular Education at the University was presented in such a way, and in such a manner, that made the Great Commission of Christ seem less important, if not altogether irrelevant.

At the University, I was taught—the literature, mathematics, economics, the

physical and social sciences, political philosophy, and law—every angle and aspect of the social problem and social evils that were visited upon the African American race since 1619 in North America.

We were taught about this problem—the historic “Negro Problem” from the great ones:

Benjamin Bannecker
Phyllis Wheatley
Lemuel Hayes
Henry Highland Garnett
Frederick Douglass
Booker T. Washington
W.E.B. Du Bois
Malcolm X
Martin Luther King, Jr.... and many others.

Here was a form of “TRUTH” – taught at the historically-black colleges and universities—that I had never before heard—or very seldom, if ever, heard—from the pulpits of the Black Church.

A **Black Truth** – taught at the historically-black college and university (HBCU)— that was fiercely relevant and fiercely important to my very existence, and to the existence and survival of my community, and yet somehow the Black Intellectual World of the HBCU – and all of its art, beauty, and promise—had somehow become dissevered and disconnected from the art, beauty, and truth of Black Church, the Holy Bible, and the Gospels...

I became familiar with the essays and texts on the “sociology” of the Black Church, written by Dr. Carter G. Woodson, Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, and the more recent scholarship by C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), p. 402.

These Texts and Essays were set forth in the great scholarly tradition of the HBCU, but addressed the growing crisis in the Black Church: These scholarly material universally reached the same conclusions, such as:

- Black Church is very important;
- Black Church is played a critical and pivotal role in helping the Black race

- survive, and even thrive, during Slavery and other adverse social conditions;
- But...many Black Churches had sunk into become an OTHER-WORLDLY RELIGION... DISCONNECTED and UNCONCERNED ABOUT THE PRACTICAL PROBLEMS OF THE BLACK POOR....
 - The Black Church could do a better job with training, educating, and paying its ministers—Indeed, the writings to W.E.B. Du Bois frequently stressed the need to cultivate an educated, well-rounded African American Christian ministry;
 - The Black Church could do a much better job with delivering the message of the Gospel in the form of real and practical social services to meet the needs of the Black poor; and,
 - The Black Church could do a much better job with fighting the social injustices that plague the African American community

In fact, in the state-sponsored HBCU that I attended in the city of Baltimore, as with most such HBCU's the important role of the Black Church was not seriously studied.

Tragically, the Black Church was not only NOT described as the first and most important institution in the African American community, but it was criticized as being Disconnected from the practical problems of the Black Poor, if not altogether a tool of European imperialism and slavery.

And so, within me—within my soul—existed, and persisted—two Great Black intellectual traditions—that of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as exemplified by the historic Black Church; and that of the Greek Academy, as exemplified by the HBCU....

These two traditions would exemplify the 2 worlds in which I would often traverse—two worlds that were complimentary, but also in contradiction and conflict with one another.

VI. The Black Legal Heritage

The third Black Tradition—that of the Fight for Civil Rights and Social Justice through Law, was third and final component of my Religious Experience.

When I entered law school at the University of Illinois, I entered upon a

Life's Work that would somehow fuse together these two great Black Traditions:

On the one hand: there was the Great Commission of the Black Church:

Matthew 28: 19-20: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost"

And there was the Great Commission of the Black Intelligensia, as exemplified in W.E.B. Du Bois' "Talented Tenth" Essay:

"Men of America, the problem is plain before you. Here is a race transplanted through the criminal foolishness of your fathers. Whether you like it or not the millions are here, and here they will remain. If you do not lift them up, they will pull you down. Education and work are the levers to uplift a people. Work alone will not do it unless inspired by the right ideals and guided by intelligence. Education must not simply teach work—it must teach Life. The Talented Tenth of the Negro race must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people. No others can do this work and Negro colleges must train men for it. The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men."

In my mind, the Gospel needed to be made real and practical—a form of Agape Love, the Love of Christ, being made manifest in forms of social action, including the constitutional right to Petition the Government for the Redress of Grievances.

When I was in law school, I purchased an 1993 Edition of *Black Enterprise Magazine* on the BLACK CHURCH—outlining and highlighting how the New Black Church had moved into sponsoring important non-profit business enterprises, such as building affording housing units for the poor; and this set in motion a chain of events in my mind with respect to what, if anything, the Black Lawyer Community and the Black Church Community could do to alleviate the myriad forms of social injustices plaguing the Black Community.

This was during the early 1990s, a period of time in which I set forth a plot to a Novel that I wrote my first novel, titled: *BISHOP EDWARDS*, story about a holy-ghost-filled, born again senior AME clergyman, who was incarcerated from his social activism on behalf of the Black Poor.

Just as Jeremiah, the Apostle Paul, and Martin Luther King, Jr. had been incarcerated from speaking truth to power about the social injustices of their day, my fictional AME Clergyman—Bishop Edwards—had been speaking truth to

power against the economic exploitation of local African American workers, which he eloquently described as the chief cause of many of the social ills affecting that local fictional community in Baltimore:

- The break-down, break-up of the Black Family;
- The deterioration of Black social cohesion and unity;
- The devastating impact of such conditions upon Black children; and,
- The proliferation of drug-trade, prostitution, gangs and crime in the Black community.

Bishop Edward's preaching and social activism influenced the local black legal community—exemplified in the person of an Assistant United States Attorney who had been assigned on the prosecution team that was assigned the task of prosecuting the Bishop.

Now the assignment of this African American lawyer to the prosecution team, that was assigned the task of prosecuting a distinguished AME Bishop, in my novel carried the symbolism of:

- The conflict between attaining Education, Social Status, and Position by African American middle-class professionals, at the Expense of Christian Spiritual Renewal, Social Justice, and Character.
- The conflict that exemplifies what happens to the Great Commission of Christ, when we find ourselves as African Americans who attain an Education and the Desire to Move-Up in our Careers or Professions, at the expense of carrying out the Great Commission of Christ.!!

Here, the two worlds—the world of the Black Middle Class Intelligentsia and the Black Church World (the great care-keeper of the Great Commission) conflict and collide.

Matthew 28: 19-20: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”

This Novel, *Bishop Edwards*, is the Blue Print for how I wanted to structure my own career as a Christian lawyer.

- I wanted the **Great Commission** of Christ to be my Foundation, and the foundation of other lawyers and judges, but especially that of the Black Bar and Bench;
- I wanted that **Great Commission** of Christ to FLOW THROUGH and be Reflected in my own legal advocacy as an Attorney, as well as the legal advocacy of all Christian lawyers—in terms of how we treated our clients who were the “least of these”; in terms of advocating boldly against injustice on behalf of the poor and the weak; and of how we functioned as a constituent part of the Church of Jesus Christ—serving as the Church’s voice within the Secular Legal System.
- Somewhere in that **Great Commission** is the **voice of Jesus**, saying: “Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment.” (John 7:24).
- Somewhere in that **Great Commission** is the **voice of the Prophet Amos**: “But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.” (Amos 5:24).
- Somewhere in that **Great Commission** is the **voice of Prophet Isaiah**: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised....” (Luke 4:18)

As we move into the 21st Century, as the American republic becomes more and more secular, as the Gospel of Jesus Christ becomes more and more marginalized and discredited in the minds of the America’s secular elite, a fundamental question that shall remain before the Church—and especially the Black Church is this:

How can the Church speak intelligently to the Secular Government on matters of law, constitution, and social justice—without born-again Christian lawyers and judges who love the Church and who are willing to speak up on its behalf?

Thus moved by the history and legacy of great Methodists John and Charles Wesley, Francis Ausbury and Richard Allen, I founded the Methodist Law Centre in order to more efficiently and effectively carryout this Christian mission as I see it.

In a word, in this complex, multifaceted, pluralistic and secular society today, the Black Church needs *Born-Again Christian Lawyers* serving the Church! And to redress the complex problems facing the Black Poor and Marginalized today, the

Black Church of the 21st Century will need *Born-Again Christian Judges* on the Bench.

CONCLUSION

The Great Commission to the Church of the 21st Century must ultimately be measured by what the Black Church does—not what the Black Church says:

It must be measured not by how intensely, creatively and passionately the Black Church sung hymns and preached sermons, but instead in how intensely, creatively, and passionately the Black Church loved its fellow human beings!

In Jesus's Great Parable of the "Sheep and the Goats," (**Matthew 25: 31-46**), he fully sets forth what he wants us to do with his Great Commission:

³⁴ "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

³⁷ "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

⁴⁰ "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

⁴¹ "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

⁴⁴ “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

⁴⁵ “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

Brother and Sisters—that concludes my Segment:

LET US REMAIN STEADFAST IN THIS FAITH OF THE GOSPEL.

AMEN!

