

**THE BLACK CHURCH...THE SOURCE OF NECESSITY?** (Opinion, *The Community Informer*, Greenville, SC, July 23, 2014, 2B.)

As I continue to remain aware and wary of the endless crimes and acts that plague our communities, divide our families, pollute our food, threaten our heritage, widen economic inequality, and harm any hope for “beloved community”, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. coined, I ask the relevant question: Is the Black Church necessary for our lives today?

Two scholars share their thoughts in response to this question. Eddie Glaude, Jr., Professor of Religion and Chair of the Center for African American Studies at Princeton University, invoked the statement that “the Black Church is Dead”. He justifies it by saying that “the idea of this venerable institution as central to black life and as a repository for the social and moral conscience of the nation has all but disappeared” (Glaude, 2010). He further supports his thesis by sharing several reasons.

First, *black churches have always been complicated spaces*. Our traditional stories about them – as necessarily prophetic and progressive institutions – run up against the reality that all too often black churches and those who pastor them have been and continue to be quite conservative...Second, *African American communities are much more differentiated*. The idea of a black church standing at the center of all that takes place in a community has long since passed away. Instead, different areas of black life have become more distinct and specialized – flourishing outside of the bounds and gaze of black churches...Thirdly, and this is the most important point, we have witnessed *the routinization of black prophetic witness*. Too often the prophetic energies of black churches are represented as something inherent to the institution, and we need only point to past deeds for evidence of this fact...but such a church loses it[s] power. Memory becomes its currency. Its soul withers from neglect (Glaude, 2010).

In other words, Glaude points out that the Black Church has become more conservative, less relevant than it once was, and stuck on the glories of the past.

Anthony Pinn, the Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Humanities and Professor of Religious Studies at Rice University, chimes in by arguing that a problem exists with Black Churches in the public arena. He expresses his concern below:

From early church leaders to figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., activism has been a part of the Black Church existence. However, this same history points out the limits of this activism – the manner in which its theological [underpinning] has hampered perceptions of democratic life inconsistent with their creedal teachings. People need moral vision strong enough to push against efforts to dehumanize them and their communities. And, churches provide a system that might accomplish this with respect to private life. However, the public arena requires something more than a private system of values and morals...Consequently, churches have a language and grammar too narrow for public exchange and discourse and no good way of thinking through the distribution of resources...I am suggesting that the Black Church – and religious organizations in more general terms – are too limited ideologically to provide a system of values sufficient to meet the needs of a population extending beyond their membership and immediate communities (Pinn, 2013).

What is Pinn saying here? He claims that the Black Church is vulnerable in communicating its mission and vision in relation to our modern society. It is not capable of thinking and speaking beyond the language of faith, heaven, and Jesus.

I must say that my colleagues present compelling arguments regarding the ability of the Black Church to become that source for ethical and moral leadership. From this, the message that Glaude and Pinn want to provoke is the need for the Black Church to examine itself, especially in relation to our nation and its ills. However, I find that these Black Church scholars are arguing from outside the institution instead of from within (Glaude from a Catholic upbringing, while Pinn is a practicing humanist). Thus, where do you stand on the necessity of the Black Church? Is it up to the task in confronting and responding to the problems around us? Does the Black Church have a prescribed vision to stir a lasting remedy for our world?

I encourage you to stay tuned as I continue my thoughts in the next article by expressing why the Black Church is needed for us today.