



THE PROPHETHOOD OF BLACK BELIEVERS



**An
African American
Political Theology
for Ministry**

J. Deotis Roberts



The Prophethood of Black Believers

AN AFRICAN AMERICAN
POLITICAL THEOLOGY
FOR MINISTRY

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FOR MY GRANDCHILDREN:

André, Jazmin, and Jewell

Introduction

“We are engaged in this ministry.”

2 Cor. 4:1

THE SUBJECT OF THIS BOOK HAS CONCERNED ME FOR many years. It has been inspired by my theological reflection and practice of ministry. As a lifelong theological teacher and educator, I have been greatly moved by the way in which my students, past and present, have carried out a dedicated and effective ministry among all sorts and conditions of human beings. In this study, the emphasis will be upon ministry in black churches, but its message will have currency wherever the word is preached and the sacraments are duly administered.

My own ministries have been varied since I was ordained in 1946. I served as pastor in North Carolina, Connecticut, and Scotland. During my formative years I served as minister to migrant workers and students. Also I was privileged to assist outstanding pastors. Among these were Dr. Henry Moore of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, and Dr. J. C. Jackson in Hartford, Connecticut. Such apprenticeships are usual in the black Baptist tradition. Having such able and caring senior mentors gave my ministry a head start.

As a young theologian and campus minister at Shaw University, I also assisted Dr. O. S. Bullock at the First Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina. Even after I was appointed theologian at Howard University Divinity School, Dean Daniel G. Hill gave me the responsibility of supervisor of fieldwork for a few years. This opportunity to relate to students and pastors in Washington and Baltimore was a great blessing to my lifetime ministry. In this role I was able to share experiences. It kept me in touch with ordinary people and allowed me to develop a love for preaching.

My ministry has also included work in prisons, in hospitals, and on military installations, at home and overseas. My larger ministry, however, has been in the education of men and women for ministry. My life has been spent primarily as theologian and in theological education as the dean of Virginia Union's School of Theology and as president of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta. In 1984 I became a theologian at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

While my devotion to ministry explains my desire to write this book, it is important to mention that I strongly believe in the mission of the church. It is for this reason that my anchor has usually been in the seminary. At times I have taken leave from the seminary for academic involvement, for research, and to serve as a college or university professor. But these have been brief periods of refreshment, reflection, and renewal. The sense of ministry as a divine call has not permitted me to distance myself from the life of the church even during the withdrawals from the seminary. The mission of the church has always been a clear summons for me. It has been obvious for me since ordination that my life should be dedicated to ministry in and through the church. Accordingly, as a theologian also trained in philosophy, I have always considered my role as that of interpreter of the faith for the people of God (Matt. 28:20).

The need for this book has been becoming more clear to me over several years. The development of the doctor of ministry degree created a clear mandate for the subject matter of this book. This advanced professional degree in ministry builds upon the basic pastoral degree, the master of divinity (M.Div.). I was challenged by the seasoned practitioners in ministry who returned to the seminary to think with them about aspects of ministry. Many had discovered their gifts in certain aspects of ministry. They desired to prepare themselves for a more effective witness in some other aspect of ministry. They needed a theological updating as well as serious theological reflection on their ministry. In lectures and discussion we attempted to empower their resources for ministry. Their needs and questions were different from the beginners in ministry.

In the black church tradition there is another group of ministers for whom this book is written. There are many gifted and able pastors who for one reason or another were not privileged to obtain a formal theological education. These men and women are involved in a dedicated ministry. They require a continuing educational program to inform and empower them for the church vocation.

Whereas in past years many theological students came to seminary early in life, today many have responded to a sense of call to ministry in middle life. These people are often professionals in some nonreligious area of service. They now desire the biblical and theological grounding

for ministry. They have acquired a vast amount of knowledge and experience that can be useful in ministry. The task is to educate these persons for effective ministry. Many have already witnessed as lay persons in the church. They now seek the status of ordained minister and leader of a congregation.

In many classroom settings in theological schools we have two age groups in the same classes. In some cases doctor of ministry and master of divinity students share advanced seminars. But even in the master of divinity classes one finds a significant number of people with different life experiences. The rapid increase in the number of women studying for ministry and seeking ordination has further enriched the range of human experiences these seminary students have had. Thus, this situation provides a rich context for peer learning. It challenges the theologian to provide the proper reflection for this rich encounter.

Outside the seminary walls, there is the need for education and renewal for laity and clergy alike for more effective ministry. In the urban context, it is now essential to take the classroom process to churches, community centers, and pastoral/church institutes where the people are. It is good for the theologian to know the setting where ministry is to be carried out. The theologian is also helped by being in touch with people in their life struggles and concerns. This is being done most effectively in Latin America. Some theologians are priests working among the poor and in base communities.

The reader will observe the ecumenical character of this study. Although I am an ordained Baptist minister, my experience as a theologian and minister has not been circumscribed. As a theologian, I have taught for most of my career in ecumenical seminaries. Even now, I teach ecumenically and serve frequently at other denominational seminaries as adjunct professor. My church experience as preacher and lecturer has been in the context of the global Christian community. From my seminary student days I have been involved in ecumenical relations. From the outset, black church studies and black theology have been ecumenical. Hence, all of my experience has brought an ecumenical outlook to this study.

The reader will also note the interdisciplinary character of this study. My theological perspective has grown in relation to several academic disciplines. It began with philosophy and biblical studies. It now includes world religions, ethics, literature, and the social sciences, among other fields of investigation. This broad excursion into various fields of knowledge is useful in reflection upon the African American religious heritage, which is holistic. The secular and the sacred, the personal and the social, the abstract and the practical interface.

The cross-cultural character of this study is also evident. Concern for the centrality of the African heritage and the black experience do not, for

me, neutralize what I have learned through vigorous study of the Western religious thought tradition. I have stated very forthrightly my method of theological dialogue in *Black Theology in Dialogue*: "Theology must be particular but not provincial. We need to combine a concrete contextual orientation with a universal vision. Contextualization should lead to humanization for ourselves and the entire human family."¹

As I reflect here upon ministry in the black church, I will draw upon sources and experiences from the world community. I affirm what seems to be of worth in all cultures and thought-systems. My task remains to understand better the mission and ministry of the black church tradition.

Now, let us turn to a brief overview of what the reader may expect to find in this book.

Chapter 1 begins with a discussion of the ministry of Jesus. The nature and ministry of the church as well as our personal ministries must be based upon a solid understanding of the ministry of Jesus. Through reflection upon the nature of the ministry of Jesus, we find various characteristics that we see as normative for those who minister in his name. The ministry of Jesus is said to be holistic—that is, priestly and prophetic at the same time. We view the church as a corporate extension of the incarnation. Just as the ministry of Jesus was to heal and set free the oppressed, the servant church must also do the same.

Chapter 2 treats ministry in the black church tradition. I view the church in black history as a crucial survival institution, along with the family and the school. The church however, has a spiritual foundation and a redeeming mission. Throughout more than two centuries the black church has been involved in healing the scars of oppression and embattled in vigorous protest against oppression based upon race. The ministry of black churches has been among the oppressed. It is against this background that theological reflection is set forth. What we say theologically about the ministry of black churches must be anchored in this historic setting to be fully meaningful.

Chapter 3 sets the stage for the more detailed discussion to follow. So much has been said in Protestant circles about the priesthood of all believers that I seized upon this concept as a clue for the distinctive ministry described in this study. The "priesthood of believers" indicates that the church is the people rather than the priests. "Priestly," here, refers to the healing, comforting dimensions of the gospel and the ministry that flows from it. While this is a vital part of the gospel, we need to emphasize the protest content of the mission and ministry of black churches. I describe this as the "prophetic" nature of the gospel. Gayraud Wilmore described this "radicalism" in his classic study.² In this chapter we reflect upon "the prophethood of black believers," with a focus on a ministry to the oppressed.

Chapter 4 takes up the black church's involvement in education. Black churches have a great opportunity to shape the thoughts of congregants. They should take this task seriously. Beginning with the pastor as educator, black churches should become teaching churches. Even the study of the Bible should be undertaken with a focus on the formation of Christian character and social uplift for a downtrodden people. Black churches have a unique opportunity to teach moral and spiritual values, especially to the young.

While chapter 4 lays a foundation for an understanding of the teaching mission of the church, chapter 5 focuses upon the task of youth development. In this chapter I emphasize nurture as a process for youth development. The role of the family is central to the message in this chapter, in which I apply much of the insight discussed in an earlier work on the black church and family, *Roots of a Black Future*.³ We must recognize the different social circumstances from which black youth come and attempt to provide helpful programmatic suggestions for ministry to youth. This is a vital ministry since the future of our people and the nation is at stake in its success.

In chapter 6 we move to pastoral care in black churches. The important studies by Edward Wimberly provide a base for theological reflection in this area of ministry. I touch on pastoral care in the black church tradition, on the way that knowledge and skills in this field of study are brought together with the wisdom of the black church tradition. Against this background we reflect upon the spiral of violence in black communities and the shepherding role of the black pastor and congregation. The therapeutic role of the black church's ministry is seen against the backdrop of its mission as an institution of social transformation.

The ministry of black women receives special attention in chapter 7. Because the number of black women with religious vocations is increasing, this concern is now acute. Most of these women seek ordination and vie for a peer status with men in church leadership. The resistance of many black men in ministry has caused a crisis in the black church leadership. The insistence of most of the men that they have a Bible-based authority for the rejection of women for ordained ministry presents issues that must be overcome by sound exegesis and serious theological reflection. While I make no promise to resolve this critical issue, I have given constructive suggestions regarding a positive resolution of this impasse. Black churches need all the able leadership available. If women are inspired by God to minister, who are we to resist this divine plan?

The economic factor is decisive in human affairs—it is true that humans cannot live by bread alone. Neither can they be fulfilled without bread. Chapter 8 tackles the problem of economic means for human

fulfillment. I begin with a theological and ethical consideration of economics. Thereafter I attempt to provide a Christian theological perspective on the economic order. In view is a responsible economic order that makes life more human. I then try to contextualize economics in the black experience. The goal is constructive participation of black ministers and churches in the economic uplift of black people as well as others who are oppressed. This is a structural concern that should be addressed by church bodies and not only by individual Christians.

Politics is another area of involvement for black ministers and congregations. Those who minister to a suffering community must face political realities. Chapter 9 takes up this thorny subject. Much of the history of the black church has been political. As a protest body against injustices due to race, black churches have been on the front line seeking the right to vote, full citizenship rights, and full participation in the political process in the United States. This chapter is an attempt to initiate a serious theological reflection on the *how* and *why* of political involvement of the black church and its leadership in social transformation through political thought and action. I seek to bring political realism and the Christian witness together in the mission and ministry of black churches.

The center of black worship is not only preaching but music. Much has been written on preaching by black scholar-pastors and theologians, but music has not been given adequate attention. Worship in the black church empowers worshipers to serve. Chapter 10, therefore, is an exercise in what Jon Michael Spencer calls “theomusicology.” I seek to interpret “soul music” or “the black song” with the intention of this entire study behind the effort. The ministry of the black church is empowered by the depth and quality of black music. Black music is characterized by *praise* and *protest*. Here again, in black music the twin attributes of black ministry, priestly and prophetic, are powerfully manifest.

In chapter 11, the final chapter of the book, I provide a summary and critical conclusion. I do not see this study as the end of a process. My intention is much more modest. I believe there needs to be a constant back-and-forth conversation between full-time scholars and those involved in a day-by-day ministry to God’s people regarding the challenges to the black church and its ministries. Some of these challenges are ideological, others are cultural, and still others are practical. For example, Afrocentrism and pluralism are very much with us, and multiculturalism promises to be a powerful influence in black communities rather soon. Black theologians and pastors are going to need to prepare to face many familiar and new challenges. There will need to be action and reflection, reflection and action to be faithful to our time-honored and august mission. I close by pointing to an “unfinished agenda” that pulls us into our future. With God’s help we can be worthy.

In sum, ministry in the black church tradition is ecumenical and holistic. There is little dispute over differences of doctrine. There are some ugly power struggles, but they are not over the interpretation of scripture or whether to be involved in social justice endeavors. Most often, struggles are contests for personal power, especially for key leadership positions. While these struggles are not to be praised, they are to be understood for what they are. The common struggle against racist oppression has neutralized the passion for conflicts of a different order. The black caucus movement in all major white church bodies brought black ecumenism to global attention in the late '60s. Black churches are not divided over quietism or activism. Black churches are generally united around actions that seek to make life more human for the oppressed. A holistic perspective on the mission and ministry of the church prevents disunity on this basis.

This study is a personal testimony for a commitment and involvement in the ministry and mission of black churches. I sense a need for this study, if only to inspire others to provide their own reflection. Indeed, I urge pastors to share the fruits of their labors with others through similar reflection. I attempt to make a special contribution to theology and ministry in these pages and especially to the oppressed.

Last, but not least, I have indicated some special characteristics of my own outlook regarding the black church tradition. May reflection upon these matters be useful for the practice of ministry in the church of Jesus Christ.

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1

Jesus, the Church, and Ministry

ANY DISCUSSION OF THE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY should begin with the ministry of Jesus. Our ministry at its best should mirror the characteristics of the ministry of Jesus to the full extent possible through the assistance of divine grace. It will, therefore, be helpful if we can look at his ministry at close range for a deeper understanding.

The church that Jesus founded is an extension of the incarnation. Jesus is viewed by Christians as God's supreme salvific revelation to humans through fleshly and historical embodiment. The church is the means by which that revelation is manifest in community and throughout history. This being so, the church becomes important as the context of ministry. It is through the church's mission and ministry that God's will is to be done on earth.

In this chapter we will discuss the personal ministry of Jesus during the days of his flesh. At the same time we will seek to outline the nature of the church he founded as the extension of God's saving purpose in our world. To understand Jesus and the church, in relation to ministry, is to lay a solid foundation for an understanding of our ministry in the church of Jesus Christ.

Exploring the Ministry of Jesus

The ministry of Jesus is to be viewed as comprehensive and holistic. Jesus looked at the entire person. He also was concerned with the individual's proper relation to others. This is true of primary relations in families and small groups, in what we might call interpersonal encounters. Jesus, however, had a concern for human welfare that reached beyond the interpersonal to the systemic. His ministry was a public

ministry, in that he opposed systems of power that were dehumanizing. While his ministry included the “least of these,” he also challenged the “greatest of these” whenever humans were being treated as nonpersons. The ministry of Jesus was personal, social, and public—it was holistic in the most comprehensive sense. Another way of stating this is that the ministry of Jesus was priestly, prophetic, and public.

The priestly aspect of the ministry of Jesus

The role of a priest is to provide comfort and assurance to those who are suffering or in trouble. In Luke 4:18, Jesus includes in what has been considered his commission to ministry the statement: “He hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted” (κῆν). More recent versions leave out this crucial phrase because it is omitted by the best Lucan manuscripts.¹ I prefer to include its meaning as we examine the priestly ministry of Jesus.

The meaning of “priestly” here does not relate to the sacrificial functions of the Jewish priesthood. It has to do more with the compassionate concern Jesus had for those whose life he touched. Jesus often “had compassion” (Mark 6:34) as he saw people who were hungry, anxious, or sick. For example, Jesus would no doubt cast his lot today with the homeless. In South Africa, he would rather dwell in Soweto than Johannesburg. His compassion was always manifest, in action as well as feeling. In this sense the ministry of Jesus was priestly ministry.

One active area of ministry in which Jesus demonstrated this priestly aspect was healing. Jesus showed concern for all types of people in all walks of life through his healing ministry. In fact, healing was so characteristic of the ministry of Jesus that he was dismissed or misunderstood by those who expected a different form of ministry from him. It was, however, the very essence of his self-understanding that ministry should be healing in nature. It is significant that the call to ministry includes the phrase: “recovery of sight to the blind” (Luke 4:18).

In our time and language we would want to include the therapeutic dimension of his ministry. Jesus is said to have had compassion on a multitude that he found confused “like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34). Those who were confused, misguided, and anxious found in Jesus what Tillich has described as the “courage to be.”²

The ministry of Jesus included all persons who came before him. There was a sense that each and every person, regardless of sex, race, or class, was equally valuable in his presence. If he had an option, it was for the needy. But there is no indication that he accepted sinfulness anywhere. In the crowd he could single out an individual in need of his healing touch. His heart was always filled with compassion. He was the priest par excellence.

The prophetic ministry of Jesus

One of the great theological insights of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was to see an unbroken line between the Old Testament prophets of social justice and the ministry of Jesus.³ Jesus was not only a priest. He was also a prophet.

If we used in this instance the typologies of Richard Niebuhr, we could say that as prophet, Jesus was “against culture.” His words and deeds were iconoclastic vis-à-vis both the religious and political establishments. His sense of the righteousness of God applied to more than personal and interpersonal relationships. The full implications of his liberation message will be seen in discussion in the next section of his “public” ministry.

Theologically, Jesus was obsessed with the “righteousness of God.” This has to do with the ethical attributes of God. Jesus came preaching that the kingdom of God is at hand (Mark 1:15). The “kingdom” of which he spoke is equivalent to the “will of God.” Thus, to “seek the kingdom” is to seek righteousness (Matt. 6:33).

Jesus was not anti-legal or antinomian in his outlook. He viewed his message in relation to Old Testament Jewish law in terms of “promise and fulfillment.” He challenged his hearers to embody in their convictions and life-styles the substance of God’s requirements. He distinguished between the *esse* (essence) and the *bene-esse* (nonessentials) of the Law. His concern for morality began with the “motives and dispositions” of the heart. Thus, if the “root” of ethics is God’s righteousness, the “fruit” will bear this out. The center of his ethical message rests in the love of God and neighbor.

This is but a brief introduction to the prophetic outlook of the ministry of Jesus. It is fundamental that we understand the ministry of Jesus in this way. His compassion as a priest did not overshadow his judgment as a prophet. His ministry always upheld the righteousness of God in personal and social life.

The public ministry of Jesus

“Public” here refers to the manner in which Jesus engaged the evils inherent in the systems of power in his time and place. Thus, the ministry of Jesus provides a basis for ministry in the public sphere. His “public” ministry is an intensification of his prophetic ministry. When one takes seriously the life and ministry of Jesus, one finds in that ministry the basis for a ministry with a public dimension. Black ministers have assumed this for more than two hundred years in this country. It is not equally clear that this sense of ministry has been substantially anchored

in biblical faith. This task is now before all Christians. It is the basis for our reflection here.

Liberation theologies, especially black and Latin American liberation theologies, have greatly contributed to this understanding of the public character of the ministry of Jesus. This has been manifest in two ways: first, in the way these theologies have viewed evil as systemic, and, second, in their christological formulations.

The understanding of evil in its systemic form greatly enhances insights into the devastating effect of the collective impact of sin and evil. The class analysis of Marxist thought has provided an instrument of interpretation for Latin American liberation theologians. Marxism takes both the collective and economic dimensions of the human situation seriously. It therefore uncovers aspects of evil often overlooked by those who focus mainly upon the personal and interpersonal aspects of human life. When Marxism (freed of dogma) becomes a receptacle for the teachings of Jesus, it can be turned to constructive use. Latin American liberation theology has made constructive use of class analysis to expose and treat the "public" aspects of the message and ministry of Jesus. Here I do not recommend an uncritical use of Marxism, but I do lift up what seems to be a constructive contribution to biblical and theological understanding. A Christian critique of any ideology is necessary.

Black theology, in the United States, has also contributed to a profound understanding of collective evil. It has done so independently of Latin American liberation theology. Black theology developed out of the black church tradition in this country. With this different history and context, black theology has developed out of "race analysis." It is not blind to social, economic, and political factors that contribute to humiliation, deprivation, and suffering. Black theology is deeply grounded in the experience of the Christian faith by black people. It takes both popular culture and biblical faith seriously. It attacks racism as a collective or systemic form of evil. The message and ministry of Jesus are essential to the formulation of black theology. Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* is rightly being lifted up as a landmark volume for the black theology tradition.⁴ This work has unusual insight into the humanity of Jesus.

These black and liberation theologians converge on two salient points, as we have seen: the collective nature of sin and evil and similar understanding of the message and ministry of Jesus. The two points are interdependent. Thus, these theologies contribute greatly to our present understanding of the task of ministry based upon the public ministry of Jesus.

One of the important emphases of liberation theologies is the focus given to the earthly life of Jesus. This goes against the grain of certain recent theological movements that stress mainly the existential and

kerygmatic attributes of the ministry of Jesus. A view of Christology that misses the life and witness of Jesus during the “days of his flesh” cannot do justice to the public dimensions of the ministry of Jesus and what this implies insofar as his public ministry is concerned. The statement in the creeds that “he was crucified under Pontius Pilate” sums up the nature of his public ministry. He was done to death by the religious and political establishments because of his opposition to systemic evil.

It is essential that the priestly, prophetic, and public aspects of the ministry of Jesus be seen as one comprehensive description of a holistic ministry. The ministry of Jesus goes beyond our ability to comprehend. We would only claim that at least these aspects of ministry are manifest and fulfilled in this messianic ministry as described in the Gospels. Our ministry cannot be profound and complete unless we take seriously these aspects of the ministry of Jesus and seek to mirror them in our ministry in his name.

The Church as an Extension of the Incarnation

The church is the body that is to carry on the mission and ministry that Jesus established in his own life and witness. We have already introduced the ministry of Jesus and affirmed that it should be the pattern for all ministries in the church. Thus, it is important that we look at the nature of the church in light of our assessment of the ministry of Jesus.

We begin by asserting that the church is properly understood as a continuation of the ministry of Jesus in a community and through history. Yet, because the church is an organization that exists in time, its true character is easily misunderstood. We want to assert that the church is more than an institution. It is first an organism of the Spirit. It is a living body, the means through which Christ continues his saving work in the world.

In our previous discussion on the ministry of Jesus, we stressed the incarnation as foundational. Jesus we understood to be the embodiment, the enfleshment, the inhistorization of the Word of God. Incarnation brings creation and redemption together. Creation and re-creation are part of one divine purpose, to redeem humankind. Jesus as truly God and truly human pulls the two dimensions of our lives together. God hallows creation through the incarnation. Creation is a means through which the greatest redemptive revelation is concretely manifest in human form. Thus, we insist that God’s incarnation in Christ Jesus is concrete and real—it is no mere appearance. God reveals God’s self concretely, supremely, and fully in the flesh, in time, through the incarnate Lord.