



## HOLY COMMUNION

### CULTURAL RESOURCES

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#### **I. Introduction - A Story**

My brother Ryan, two mutual friends, and I decided to visit a well-know predominantly African America mega church in Dallas, Texas. As we were finding a place to park, my three companions were awed at the number of expensive cars that were in the parking lot as well as by the massive size of the church building. As we walked toward the entrance of the church, a dance team of young black teenage boys were poppin' and lockin' to Holy Hip Hop. All four of us were greeted by ushers, and they led us to our seats at the entrance of the sanctuary. I noticed that persons who happened to be dressed fashionably and up-to-date were seated closest to the pulpit while the people with less stylish clothes were led by the ushers to the stairs to be seated

near the balcony. No one who was with me said anything about this, but for some reason I was deeply bothered by this obvious class stratification. It seemed those dressed in their Sunday best, who looked as if they fit nicely into the category of upper middle-class, were seated in the sanctuary where the cameras were, while the guests and members who did not dress the part were placed outside of the camera's view.

The gospel that was proclaimed from the large pulpit, through song, drama, and preached words, was a message that appealed to an upper-middle class African American audience. I immediately understood why I was upset when the Holy Spirit reminded me of James 2:3-5. "For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please', while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there', or, 'Sit at my feet', have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?"

## II. Divisions in the Bible And in Culture

Divisions between socio-economic classes are nothing new in the Body of Christ. One of the many problems in the Corinthian assembly that the apostle Paul confronts is the fellowship's divisions which are revealed in its poor attention to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Biblical scholar Boykin Sanders elaborates, "In particular, the celebration of the supper shows evidence of the social stratification [...]; the poor are left hungry while the rich are given to splurging (cf. 11:27-32). [...] The community is called to exhibit the Christ-crucified message through solidarity, in particular by waiting for each other and sharing in the celebration of the Lord's Supper as a unified group, regardless of social standing."<sup>1</sup>

The class warfare, practiced by the church at Corinth in Paul's day, and also the socio-economic segregation that we see in the black church today, stand in contradiction to the reconciling work of God in Jesus of Nazareth's death. In the Christian context, reconciliation happens primarily through the atoning death of Jesus Christ. The Greek word for atonement (see Rom. 5:11), *katallage*, can be literally translated as "downing the otherness."<sup>2</sup> In the Christian context, the English translation of the word atonement indicates that two parties (humanity and God), which had once been separated, are now placed at-one, in harmony with one another.

The African American Protestant tradition actually began as a movement of solidarity by those who were less fortunate, because their white Christian brothers and sisters often saw moments in the church, such as communion, as one more opportunity to "down the other." According to Melva Wilson Costen, enslaved African Christians were given pewter coins at Charleston, South Carolina Presbyterian churches while the Euro-Americans were given silver coins; these coins were to be held by participants preparing to take the Communion.<sup>3</sup> At interracial church services, African Americans with tokens had to wait until the Euro-American enslavers had taken the bread and wine. The early communion experiences at the Lord's table by enslaved Africans were one of exclusion based on racism and classism. Like the church at Corinth, colonial Christian America forgot to remember the *purpose* of the breaking of the bread and the consumption of the wine: the remembrance of Jesus Christ's atoning death. God became at-one with suffering humanity in Jesus of Nazareth so that we may be in greater communion with God and thereby with one another. The Lord's table represents our faithfulness to the Messiah who, as a great

example for us, put to death the class divisions of imperial Rome by joining in solidarity with the powerless.

### **III. A Song That Speaks to the Moment**

The song “In Christ There Is No East Or West,” which has been sung in churches for almost one hundred years, describes how, no matter our geographic region, ethnicity, race, or gender, we are all one in Christ. Why? Because God the father and mother of us all has given us an inheritance as God’s children through the giving of God’s only begotten son. So when we take communion, whether in Georgia in the United States or Georgia in the Soviet Union, if we are Christians, we are all still one. Communion brings together; it does not divide.

#### **In Christ There Is No East Or West**

In Christ there is no East or West,  
In him no South or North;  
but one great fellowship of love  
throughout the whole wide earth.

In him shall true hearts everywhere  
their high communion find;  
His service is the golden cord,  
close binding humankind.

Join hands, then, members of the faith,  
whatever your race may be!  
Who serves my Father as his child  
is surely kin to me.

In Christ now meet both East and West,  
in him meet North and South;  
all Christly souls are one in him  
throughout the whole wide earth.<sup>4</sup>

### **IV. A Historical Lesson of Division**

One of the leading early African American Protestant denominations began as an actual protest against racial and socio-economic injustice. In 1787, black worshippers at St. George’s Methodist Episcopal church in Philadelphia were met with physical barriers when they attempted to go up to the altar to pray.<sup>5</sup> When they were not permitted to pray to their God alongside Euro-Americans, the black worshippers withdrew their membership from the church. Richard Allen, one of the leaders among the black worshippers, created the Free African Society which existed as a mutual aid group to address the plight of Africans in America, both enslaved and freed. In 1799, Richard Allen was ordained a Methodist elder by Methodist Bishop Francis Asbury. Seventeen years later, the body Allen helped form grew and became a conference known as the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.). Allen and the leaders of the early A.M.E. church remained loyal to some Wesleyan/Methodist ideals in this new denomination, but they took a

much harsher anti-slavery stance than did the Methodist church out of which their denomination grew.

As one of the first founders of an independent African American Christian denomination, Richard Allen's story should serve as a reminder of the black church's historical roots. Neither the enslaved Africans in the A.M.E. church nor the early black Baptists churches had the luxury of discriminating against the less fortunate. However, the anti-liberation behavior that I witnessed at the Dallas mega church is symptomatic of the growing apathy North American society has for the less fortunate. More and more, even in black churches, persons would rather hear sermons about Jesus' miracles and his desire to make them prosperous rather than proclaim that we are connected to the poor via the communion table. As the body of Christ, we need to celebrate the Lord's Supper in a manner that protests the classism that prevails in our society and places us firmly in solidarity with the poor.

The song "In Remembrance," serves as a reminder for us to remember that because Jesus died on the cross, we are to feed the poor and open the door to strangers just as Jesus loved and became one with those on the margins. This allows us to eat of the bread that is his body and drink of the wine that is his blood, without eating and drinking in disharmony with his liberation ethic. Remembering Jesus' preference for the poor helps us view communion as more than a ritual that we partake of each Sunday, once a month, or at other times, just because we are members of a church. It impresses upon us that communion is a solemn act and attached to it are real responsibilities.

### **In Remembrance**

In remembrance of Me, eat this bread;  
In remembrance of Me, drink this wine;  
In remembrance of me, pray for the time  
when God's own will is done.

Verse two

In remembrance of Me, heal the sick;  
In remembrance of Me, feed the poor;  
In remembrance of Me, open the door  
And let your brother in, let him in.

Take eat and be comforted;  
Drink and remember, too,  
that this is my body and precious blood  
shed for you,  
shed for you,

In remembrance of Me, search for truth.  
In remembrance of Me, always love.  
In remembrance of Me, don't look above, but  
In your heart, look in your heart for God.  
Do this in remembrance of Me.<sup>6</sup>

## V. Poetry

In God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse, James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938), who also wrote what is now known as the Black National Anthem, uses his pen to picturesquely help us see the journey that Jesus takes on the way to his death. Johnson points out for us, that blood was really shed for us. There was spit and thorns and mockery and tears. Johnson does not allow us to rush to the communion table to celebrate over bread and wine. He walks us step-by-step, heart-breaking scene, by heart-breaking scene from Gethsemane's Garden to Calvary's hill. This is Jesus' journey before he returns to the right hand of God as our intercessor and the one to whom we give thanks as we break bread and drink wine together.

### The Crucifixion

Jesus, my gentle Jesus,  
Walking in the dark of the Garden --  
The Garden of Gethsemane,  
Saying to the three disciples:  
Sorrow is in my soul --  
Even unto death;  
Tarry ye here a little while,  
And watch with me.

Jesus, my burdened Jesus,  
Praying in the dark of the Garden --  
The Garden of Gethsemane.  
Saying: Father,  
Oh, Father,  
This bitter cup,  
This bitter cup,  
Let it pass from me.

Jesus, my sorrowing Jesus,  
The sweat like drops of blood upon his brow,  
Talking with his Father,  
While the three disciples slept,  
Saying: Father,  
Oh, Father,  
Not as I will,  
Not as I will,  
But let thy will be done.

Oh, look at black-hearted Judas --  
Sneaking through the dark of the Garden --  
Leading his crucifying mob.  
Oh, God!  
Strike him down!

Why *don't* you strike him down,  
Before he plants his traitor's kiss  
Upon my Jesus' cheek?

And they take my blameless Jesus,  
And they drag him to the Governor,  
To the mighty Roman Governor.  
Great Pilate seated in his hall,--  
Great Pilate on his judgment seat,  
Said: In this man I find no fault.  
I find no fault in him.  
And Pilate washed his hands.

But they cried out, saying:  
Crucify him!--  
Crucify him!--  
Crucify him!--  
His blood be on our heads.  
And they beat my loving Jesus,  
They spit on my precious Jesus;  
They dressed him up in a purple robe,  
They put a crown of thorns upon his head,  
And they pressed it down --  
Oh, they pressed it down --  
And they mocked my sweet King Jesus.

Up Golgotha's rugged road  
I see my Jesus go.  
I see him sink beneath the load,  
I see my drooping Jesus sink.  
And then they laid hold on Simon,  
Black Simon, yes, black Simon;  
They put the cross on Simon,  
And Simon bore the cross.

On Calvary, on Calvary,  
They crucified my Jesus.  
They nailed him to the cruel tree,  
And the hammer!  
The hammer!  
The hammer!  
Rang through Jerusalem's streets.  
The hammer!  
The hammer!

The hammer!  
Rang through Jerusalem's streets.

Jesus, my lamb-like Jesus,  
Shivering as the nails go through his hands;  
Jesus, my lamb-like Jesus,  
Shivering as the nails go through his feet.  
Jesus, my darling Jesus,  
Groaning as the Roman spear plunged in his side;  
Jesus, my darling Jesus,  
Groaning as the blood came spurting from his wound.  
Oh, look how they done my Jesus.

Mary,  
Weeping Mary,  
Sees her poor little Jesus on the cross.  
Mary,  
Weeping Mary,  
Sees her sweet, baby Jesus on the cruel cross,  
Hanging between two thieves.

And Jesus, my lonesome Jesus,  
Called out once more to his Father,  
Saying:  
My God,  
My God,  
Why hast thou forsaken me?  
And he drooped his head and died.

And the veil of the temple was split in two,  
The midday sun refused to shine,

The thunder rumbled and the lightning wrote  
An unknown language in the sky.  
What a day! Lord, what a day!  
When my blessed Jesus died.

Oh, I tremble, yes, I tremble,  
It causes me to tremble, tremble,  
When I think how Jesus died;  
Died on the steeps of Calvary,  
How Jesus died for sinners,  
Sinners like you and me.<sup>7</sup>

“The Blood Song” by Kirk Franklin is a 21<sup>st</sup> century song that attempts to teach some of the same lessons the Apostle Paul sought to teach through our lection for today--the death of Christ

on the cross was for our sins and makes us one when we commune and remember, and when we live as if we remember.

### **The Blood Song**

You have the power  
To make the seasons change  
The river flows for you  
The wind whispers your name  
For me you left your throne  
And traded crown for thorns instead  
I'm safe within not by your skin  
But because your blood was red

Some say you're black, you're white  
They question if you're real  
We treat you like we treat ourselves  
I wonder how you feel  
To see your children fight in spite  
of the tears for us you've shed  
Doesn't matter what color you are  
As long as your blood was red

#### *[Chorus]*

For it's strong enough  
to wash away my sins  
And it's pure enough  
To cleanse me deep within  
And it's real enough  
To find me when I'm lost  
Great enough  
To die upon the cross  
It doesn't matter what color you are  
As long as your blood was red

We may be different but  
The God we serve's the same  
Yet every Sunday we separate  
And bring the Father pain  
Your name is higher than any other  
Yet you took my place instead  
And now my sins are washed away  
Because your blood was red

#### *[Chorus]*

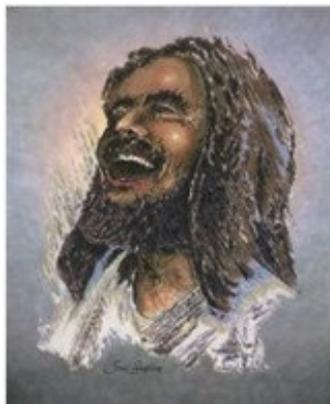
For it's strong enough  
To wash away my sins

And it's pure enough  
To cleanse me deep within  
And it's real enough.<sup>8</sup>

## VI. Audio Visual Aids

- After the Lord's supper is celebrated, ask the congregation to proceed by "Passing the Peace" (to a person they do not know, if possible) and, as they are doing so, ask them to speak the phrase--**As we commune together, I will not live in ways that harm you.**
- **Develop Communion Banners** - Banners can be designed to accommodate communion being served during various seasons of the liturgical year. Simple, yet colorful and powerful banners can be made or purchased. This year, consider designing or having designed banners that show Jesus with the poor, along with an image of a communion cup or chalice and bread. For at least one of your banners, use an image of a smiling or laughing Jesus. Sample images are below. Get your youth involved in this. Try a silk-screening process instead of the typical cloth banners. Even paper banners can be used from time to time.

### Sample Banner Images



## VII. Making It a Memorable Learning Moment

- **The One Campaign:** The ONE campaign<sup>9</sup> is a nonpartisan organization that promotes at-one-ness with those suffering from poverty and hunger around the world. To really bring home the message that we are one through communion, why not begin a new tradition at your church. At least once each month, or once each quarter, as communion is served, ask persons to contribute to The One Campaign or a similar organization after they complete communion. Design special baskets with labels that say, **This is for the Poor— We now Commune with Them** or some other appropriate phrase. After persons have participated in communion, they can be invited to come forth and make a contribution. Then, no less than a month after contributions have been given, the congregation should be told how their donations helped the poor. To fully bring home this message, make sure that scriptures and liturgical readings that make clear the responsibilities connected with communion are printed in the bulletin/order of worship and placed on screens and

banners. You may even want to send out a special e-blast each time that you plan to engage in collecting donations for the poor and marginalized to further cement this message within the lifestyle of your congregation.

- Read and discuss in Sunday Schools, Sabbath School or Bible Study: Ehrenreich, Barbara. Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001; and

Wilson, William J. The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

### Notes

1. Sanders, Boykin. "Corinthians." Brian K. Blount, Ed. True to Our Native Land an African American New Testament Commentary. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008. p. 295.
2. Richardson, Alan and John Stephen Bowden. The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1983. p.50.
3. Costen, Melva Wilson. African American Christian Worship. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993. p.65.
4. In Christ There Is No East or West. African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 2001. #399
5. Pinn, Anne H. and Anthony B. Pinn. Fortress Introduction to Black Church History. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002. pp. 31-35
6. In Remembrance. The African American Heritage Hymnal. #685
7. Johnson, James Weldon. God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse. 1929. New York, NY: The Viking Press, 1969. pp. 39-44.
8. Franklin, Kirk. "The Blood Song." The Rebirth of Kirk Franklin. Inglewood, CA: Gospocentric, 2002.
9. The One Campaign. Online location: <http://www.one.org/about/> accessed 5 September 2008.