

Three Things That the Black Church Can Do in 2013

by Sydney R. Lovelace

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I first encountered *Your Spirit Walks Besides Us: the Politics of Black Religion*, by Barbara Savage, during my final semester of seminary. I was required to wrestle with this text just as Jacob wrestled with an angel of God at night. I was determined to find answers to the questions that plagued and arrested me, as the author raised several points that were startling for me. One of the astounding statements I encountered in the book was:

For them [Du Bois, Woodson, and Mays], black churches were too emotional in worship style and too focused on heaven and not enough on earth. Churches were small, too many, and too independent of any centralized authority, including control over their growth and direction. The masses of poor black people were comfortable with emotional services and otherworldliness; middle class and elite blacks were not, but had no way of acquiring influence over black religious life. As a result, black churches had been in steady decline since Reconstruction and were failing to meet the growing contemporary needs generated by war migration, economic depression, and Jim Crow.¹

My initial reaction was, “That is untrue; I have never heard anyone make such a statement.” I immediately went to my computer and began to construct a quick timeline of the movements of African Americans in America, politically, socially, and religiously, in hopes that I could form my own conclusions and that they would be different from those of Savage.

I was unable to draw any definitive conclusions during my short history study, so the statement by Savage continued to haunt me. Soon thereafter, I discovered that Dr. Savage would be on campus and would speak to my class about her book. I wanted answers to my ponderings. I asked her, “In what ways have black churches been in decline since Reconstruction?” The substance of Dr. Savage’s response was that churches were in decline in all aspects of

demography—membership, finances, spirituality, number of churches, and leadership. Dr. Savage concluded with a statement that helped me begin to make some sense out of the text that I referenced. She said, “The demand was greater than the supply.”

As I engaged Dr. Savage’s book and other resources, I was able to see the truth at the heart of her somewhat-shocking statement. The foundation of her book rests upon the works of W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, and Benjamin Mays. These three individuals established the benchmark for the study of African American churches and religion in the early 1900s. Engaging those authors along with Nannie Burroughs and Fannie Lou Hamer, Dr. Savage offers a multitude of critiques and a few affirmations of historical black churches.

From my experience, the criticisms that were raised over one hundred years ago, are still a present reality—advancements have been made but there is still so much work to do. The most prevalent critiques that Dr. Savage offers and that I witness most frequently are: the black community has too many small churches; lacks financial stability; fails to pool religious resources for the improvement of the entire community; often produces other-worldly theologies; lacks sound church administration; employs a male-dominant clergy class; and promotes too many unhealthy churches, pastors, preachers, and leaders who are morally corrupt, lazy, visionless, uneducated, too emotional, and ego- and money-driven.

How can the Black Church overcome these damning criticisms? If we are honest, I am sure that we know of numerous churches about which these claims are untrue. However, we likely know far more those for whom they are true! Although the stains of the aforementioned laundry list cannot be washed out overnight, there are three practical and important cleaning agents that can begin to dissolve the stains. Unfortunately, we will not be able to “shout it out,” as the popular stain remover commercial tells us to do. We have to work it out!

The three most important catalytic ideas that black churches should support mentally, physically, and financially in 2013 are: 1. Involving of women in all aspects of church leadership; 2. Saving lives first and souls second; and 3. Reclaiming the prophetic voice and witness of the Black Church.

First, involve women in all Church leadership positions. Leadership roles for women should not be limited to missionary societies, music ministries, children and youth ministries, Christian Education, and other non-paid ministries. There should be a place for women on deacon boards, trustee boards, and ministerial staffs. In 2013, pastors and congregations must exegete their local church in order to raise their consciousness until they understand that there is something theologically and socially wrong, with congregations that are mainly female in membership, mainly being led by males. The majority of the financial support and uncompensated ministry labor for all churches is provided by females. This grave wrong will not be righted unless male pastors—whom, reasonably or not, women follow—begin to accept women as equal partners and say so, in public. Too many male pastors are afraid of encountering the wrath of their peers, their denominations, and church leaders, so they cower and do not advocate for equality for their sisters. Then, lay women and men in churches, with and/or without the urging of male pastors, have to begin to advocate for women to be placed in leadership roles in churches, especially paid roles.

This all must begin with priestly listening: women need to be able to tell their gut-wrenching and soul-stirring stories of non-acceptance and abuse inflicted on them by the male-dominated clergy class and the laity that enables this abuse. Second, there needs to be someone to witness this testimony, a third-party presence that not only creates a safe space for speaking but also receives the words when they finally are spoken. Third, the testifier and the witness must

begin the process of telling a new story together. People of faith must begin to pave a new road through the ecclesial community in which the ultimate pragmatic task is to embrace fully women in ministry. Through this process, individuals, families, and churches can begin to promote wholeness and restoration.²

The second thing the Black Church should do in 2013 is create a paradigm shift in which churches are actively seeking first to save lives and souls second. This important task may sound heretical and unorthodox. In most black churches, we have been trained and programmed by church dogma that tells us that first, we must save souls. I am sick and tired of churches serving up simple and self-serving evangelistic appeals and approaches with a primary goal of swelling their church membership rolls. Saving souls is an important aspect of our Christian witness, but we need to save lives—first. If our people are daily living through hell, why would they embrace a “just get your soul saved” agenda? When churches are spiritually and financially, focused first on saving lives, then we will see communities, homes, institutions, and the lives of everyday people transformed. When individuals are stuck in a perpetual state of trauma, distress, crisis, addiction, incarceration, and mistreatment by unjust social systems, their primary concern is survival and seeking their daily bread. They’ll have an ear to hear our evangelistic appeals after they are employed, educated, fed, clothed, brought in doors, and released from prison.

Churches can begin to save lives by creating, developing, and implementing initiatives that speak life and meet the needs of poor and struggling people. African American communities are being ravished by a legion of evils—mass incarceration, crime, poverty, HIV/AIDS, absent parents, and every disparity known to Americans, but the majority of our churches are failing to meet those needs in more than a cursory and occasional fashion. In order to save lives first, and

then souls, churches must become better stewards of their resources. For example, I am passionate about the Black Church helping to lessen mass incarceration. A simple initiative that would “speak life” to families is using church vans (perhaps those of several churches collectively) to transport the families of incarcerated individuals to see their incarcerated loved ones. Prisoners are often detained in rural areas and a lack of transportation and excessive telephone charges prevent families from regularly communicating with their loved ones who are imprisoned. Not every initiative has to be large or expensive to make a major difference, but each one must have as its focus positively impacting the lives of everyday people because the Church is concerned about their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.

When I read the Gospel narrative I see Jesus as a person who saved lives first and souls second. Through my Christology, I see Jesus as a political and religious revolutionary who challenged and transformed the social order of his day. Jesus worked and acted on behalf of everyday people—widows, orphans, strangers, and women. Many of the miracles that Jesus performed were life-saving measures that restored people to life and community. Very seldom did Jesus make a person’s soul his primary concern. Jesus was the physician who operated a health clinic for the uninsured. Jesus was the head of the food pantry that provided food for the hungry. Jesus was the preacher who released people from demonic strongholds. In 2013, churches must treat the needs of people as holy and create “speak life” initiatives that address the physical, mental, and then the spiritual needs of persons.

Third, in 2013, churches must begin to proclaim the prophetic witness of Jesus and the prophetic voice of our religious foreparents. It is a sin and a shame that churches have condensed Jesus’ preaching to loving our enemies, not judging one another, and not being

anxious about our troubles. The parables he spoke now only offer eschatological meaning in many church circles.

It is crucial for churches to understand that a large component of Jesus' ministry was about liberation and inclusion of the excluded. Jesus was a political revolutionary and a catalyst of social change. He dealt directly with the political and religious rulers, the powers and principalities that were draining the life-blood and resources out of individuals and communities. His ministry changed the political, social, and economic structures of his day in order that the least of these would have the opportunity to live peacefully and freely from economic, political, and religious oppression.

In order for the African American church to reclaim its prophetic voice in 2013, pastors and laity must be armed with the factual history of the social ills and evils that are ravishing communities of color, now. It is critical to know the origins and developments of these social ills whether it be poorly performing schools, mass incarceration, HIV/AIDS, limited healthcare access, or a lack of economic opportunities for people of color. This factual history should be communicated in sermons, Bible studies, and Sunday school.

A prophetic voice from the pulpit should also include sound commentary on matters of social justice. And, it should be a discerning critic of un-factual propaganda and rhetoric that is pitched by politicians and media pundits—print and electronic—in order to reveal the lies and myths of societal corporate systems and structures. This prophetic voice ought to prick the conscience of church leaders so that they actively support and engage in social justice work. People from the pew ought to be physically present to support and demand social change within a community. This prophetic voice should rise out of Scripture and intersect with the injustices of our day and the needs of our people.

I am reminded of when Jesus cleaned out the temple. In that moment, he used his God-ordained, spiritually anointed voice to provide social, political, and religious commentary that ultimately purged the temple of corrupt power brokers and religious officials who were taking advantage of the poor. Jesus changed the dynamics of the temple and the financial standing of families instantly.

We just celebrated Emancipation Proclamation Day. Now we need to be vigilant to announce emancipation—to allow women to serve in paid pastoral ministry and all areas of church leadership; to sound the trumpet of jubilee to save lives first; and to reclaim our prophetic tradition and witness that will remove political, economic, and religious strangleholds that are killing our people.

Notes

1. Savage, Barbara. Your Spirit Walks Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 65–66.

2. Jones, Serene. Trauma + Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 32.