

The Oliver Lyseight Annual Lecture

Dr Joe Aldred – February 2008

New Testament Church of God, Leadership Training Centre

Challenges of Black Pentecostal Leadership in the 21st Century

Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to address you on this special occasion of the opening of this Leadership Training Centre. May I congratulate all of you on what must have been sheer hard work to get this far. I suspect there's more hard work ahead to make it a success. I pledge you my prayers and support in whatever ways I can be helpful; personally, and through my work at Churches Together in England. I have been asked to address myself to the subject 'Challenges of Black Pentecostal Leadership in the 21st Century', and I welcome the opportunity to reflect upon this important theme. I am not the first to attempt to identify and articulate the key challenges that face us, and I am sure I will not be the last. And so I come to this task humbly and prayerfully. I suspect that nothing of what I have to say will be new to some of you and certainly it will not be rocket science, however, I hope that our engagement together, with God in our midst will bring some illumination; some new light to guide us on our way. I intend to lay before us today seven key challenges, but I begin by unpacking the title of my lecture: **Challenges of Black Pentecostal Leadership in the 21st Century**.

Challenge

In contemporary parlance, we can tend to view the word 'challenge' in somewhat passive terms. However, in its true meaning, 'challenge' implies an invitation or summon to do something, like take part in a contest.(1) When the Philistine champion, the giant Goliath of Gath challenged Saul and the men of Israel to 'choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to (fight) me' (1 Sam 17.9), that was a challenge that demanded a response; which eventually David made and spared King Saul's and Israel's blushes. A challenge demands a response, and if a response is not forthcoming, the contest is awarded in favour of one's opponent. So when today we speak of the challenges facing us we are not referring to something passive, hypothetical, or ephemeral; rather, we refer to matters that confront us and which demand our response. And we fail to respond at our peril.

Black Pentecostal

In the British context, 'Black Pentecostal' has two main meanings. First, it refers to those churches that are led and membered in the majority by people of African and Caribbean heritages.(2) Black skin colour is important in the British context because it is symbolic of a particular sociology, history and experience lived in relation to the adversity of white racism.(3) Black is therefore more than skin deep. Second, 'Black Pentecostal' belongs to the movement that is rooted in the experience that is iconized by Azusa Street and related revivals, that emerged around and after 1900; of which the five enduring identifying theological marks, according to the Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements are:

Black Pentecostalism in Britain derives from this tradition and according to Christian Research's 2005 English Church Census, is among the fastest growing in an overall declining national church attendance; with, for example, the New Testament Church of God showing an increase of 37% in Sunday attendance between 1998 and 2005.(5) But before we get carried away, its worth remembering that African and Caribbean people total just 2% of the overall population and furthermore not all Black churchgoers are Pentecostals.(6) By extrapolating from Brierley's figures, we can suggest that in 2005, 51% the 300,000 Pentecostal church goers were Black. There are at least that many Black worshipers in the historic and other independent churches in Britain.....

A Nation that has rejected God

Sometimes I feel like I live in the nation upon which woe was pronounced because they forgot God and called evil good and good evil, darkness light and light darkness, bitter sweet and sweet bitter (Isaiah 5.20). Sometimes it feels like the time referred to in Romans 1.18- 21 '...for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness...because although they

knew God they did not glorify him as God...’ I scarcely need remind you of the spiritual, social, political and economic chaos we are in locally, nationally and internationally. There are numerous international political and economic wars and intra-national tribal conflicts, 10% of the world consume 90% of the world’s resources, with millions dying in abject poverty; the phenomenon of globalisation means that multi-nationals backed by unfair trade arrangements keep the rich rich and the poor poor. A report by Ian Duncan Smith’s, titled ‘Breakdown Britain’, highlights issues such as family breakdowns, educational failure, worklessness and economic dependence, addictions and indebtedness among our ills; then there is the little fact that our kids are lost, being killed and killing each other on our streets.(18) Is it any wonder that some now view the church and particularly the Black Church as the last hope of redemption for this country. As someone told me recently, it’s only the church that can help us now! And some of our own have articulated what a few of these challenges are; let me name three. First, Robert Beckford continues to argue that the Black Church must develop a political theology and praxis, and not allow notions of transcendence through rapturous music, singing and preaching to foster political ignorance and naivety.(19) Second, Anthony Reddie has argued for the Black Church to develop an education programme that is liberative, providing people with the tools to survive in a racialised environment.(20) We do not need education that simply create clones, and obedient denominational cadres. Third, Mark Sturge has laid down the challenges of credibility and integrity, relevance, confidence, spiritual impact, inspiring young people, and punching our weight in the public square.(21) Many others from inside and outside have challenged the Black Pentecostal Church, yet it remains to be seen whether we have the stomach for the fight. Have we the will to move beyond maintenance to mission? On the assumption that my part-rhetorical question attracts a ‘yes’, I want to name seven clear challenges that I believe demand answers. I posit them in the hope that this Leadership Centre will help facilitate an articulate and spiritual response to them.....

7) The Missiological Challenge

The seventh challenge I suggest lie before us is one concerning mission. I have never forgotten the many leaders I interviewed during my PhD research, who declared unequivocally that they believe God had brought Black Christians to Britain to bring about revival in a country in which the Christian church was in, or heading towards, an apostate state.(54) Sadly, sixty years on it does not appear that mainstream Christianity has been rescued, but our mission to hold the bible high, resist racism and refuse to compromise the gospel as we understood it was and is very clear. Clear too was our sense of mission to seek out and rescue the lost from amongst us. Oliver Lyseight for example, makes clear in his autobiography that he was personally quite comfortable, but it was observing his fellow Caribbean people with nowhere to worship that motivated him to start the mission in Wolverhampton.(55) However, having now passed that formative stage of mission, our membership now grows from immigration and migration, not from converts from the mainstream population. The question is, what shape must the ministry of the Black Pentecostal church be to be effective and relevant in the 21st Century?.....

For a copy of the complete text contact the Leadership Training Centre: education@ntcg.org.uk

The Oliver Lyseight Annual Lecture

Dr Robert Beckford – March 2009

New Testament Church of God, Leadership Training Centre

Challenges of Black Pentecostal Leadership in the 21st Century From Mission to Maintenance: Resisting the Bewitchment of Colonial Christianity

Introduction

I want to begin by thanking you for inviting me to contribute to this prestigious lecture series. I hope that my paper will be as stimulating as last year's by Bishop Joe Aldred. His paper makes it easy to situate this offering as a continuation of the debate around the future of Black Pentecostal education. As James Cone states, the task of the theologian is to be critical of the church. My interpretation of Cone on the task of the theologian is that theologians are to be in critical solidarity with the Church. So I offer this paper as someone who Loves God, is part of the liberating work of the Kingdom but thinks that the black Church could and should be doing a lot better.

My academic work is in the field of religion and culture. To put it simply, I am interested in the multiplicity of ways that Christianity and culture converge and diverse in religious history. I look at these interactions through a variety of lenses including those of my slave and colonial fore parents who possessed perspectives that I believe we can learn from in the present. Today, in this paper, I will continue to combine theology and culture in this vein by working with the Christian theme of ecclesiology but through the critical lenses of post-colonialism.

Ecclesiology, I understand to be a body, but with problematic divisions. And from the outset the early church sought out ways of transforming divisions into the reality of Christ body where there are no divisions (Gal 3:27). However, the metaphor of the body has not erased differences; we have not all evolved into a new species devoid of gender, class or ethnicity! So the struggle remains for the church to offer signs of God's reign on earth. Specific to us is the question of how the Black Pentecostal church tradition in Britain might better represent God's reign on earth. Post colonialism, I understand as recognition that while colonial period has ended, the world and indeed Christianity have not moved beyond the problems created by colonization. For this reason former colonial subjects speak of *neocolonialism*, the idea that new forms economic, political and military oppression replaced the old forms. Likewise, black British theorists talk of domestic neo-colonialism to express the ways that the colonial order has been reconfigured in contemporary Britain.

Applied to the church, postcolonial theologians remind us that the weaving together of Christianity with commerce and racism led to complex relationships of domination and subordination, superiority and inferiority, between missionaries and their colonial converts. I am interested in colonial retention, specifically, the ways that the experience of slavery and colonization continue to impact on our ecclesiology, what it means to be the people of God. To this end the title of this paper focuses our minds on how the *kerygma* (message) of the Black Church of African Caribbean origin, is muted by the continued impact of colonialism. Our ecclesiology, rather than being completely free from this past we are bound up with it in at least two ways, African retention and missionary retention.

African retention refers to the ways that slaves and colonial subjects adapted their traditional African beliefs to Christianity, so as to retain an African base or interpretation. A good example of this approach is found in Roswith Gerloff's study of the Oneness Tradition in 1980s and the emergence of church as a 'movement organization.' *Missionary retention* explores the ways that missionary theology was imposed upon African subjects and how this process continues to influence church life in the Caribbean and amongst its diaspora. A good example of this second school is Dianne Austin-Broos' study of Pentecostals in Jamaica. Broos focuses on the continued tension between the African rite or celebration and the missionary morality or moral orders. In reality, the African Caribbean Christianity that informs Black Pentecostalism in Britain is a mixture of the two, either an African adaptation of Christianity or a creolized mixture, depending on the cartography (mapping technique) of your historiography (historical method).

I am primarily interested in the second camp, missionary retention, but I want to approach it in a provocative way. I want argue that we Pentecostals continue to live with the influence of missionary theology in many ways, (including liturgy, doctrine and language). But I want to expose or 'out' other often hidden retentions related to the worst excesses of missionary theology - when missionary theology colludes with the rationality of racial terror and acts out this terror on black subjects as a form of occult practice.

I want to ask, “Do we Black Pentecostals live with the continued impact of a missionary bewitchment?” And, how might this continued bewitchment impact on our value of theological education? When I refer to missionary bewitchment, I am thinking of corrupt Christian ideas and practices that can through religious and anthropological studies consider occult.

There are four stages to this quest. First I want examine what we mean by bewitchment – the practice of witchcraft. Second, I want to apply a measure of what bewitchment is to the act of enslavement and missionary theology’s legitimation of this terror. Next I want to explore the bicentennial of the Abolition of the Slave Trade in Britain as an example of continued mass bewitchment. And finally, examine how theological education or the lack of it continues to be influenced by bewitchment tropes (themes).....

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