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The Black Church: Its Implications for Lutheran Theological Education

CHARLES SHELBY ROOKS

The following article was originally delivered as a major talk at the September 1969 meeting of Lutheran Theological Seminary Presidents and Deans in Dubuque, Iowa. Dr. Rooks is executive director of the Fund for Theological Education, Princeton, N. J. The article is substantially the same as the speech.

One year ago at the opening Communion service for Princeton Seminary I said the following:

I am just about convinced that the predominantly white seminaries in this nation will never seriously attempt to relate themselves seriously to black Christians. I am about ready to suggest that, for the health of black churches and the black community, black students and professors should withdraw from white theological schools and seek together to find the answers to their questions. Nothing that has happened in American theological education up to this very moment helps me to believe that white seminaries will ever regard black Christianity as something central to their main interests.

In view of that statement, from which I have not yet retreated, you will understand how intrigued I was to receive Ted Bachmann's invitation to speak to you in the hope that this is an indication that I was wrong—and I hope I can be proved to be wrong!

At the same time, as I thought about this address, I was frustrated on at least two counts:

1. I don't really know how much you have read about or understand this subject,

and I do not know therefore how elemental I should be in talking to you. Much of what I have to say you may already know, but I thought I should be fairly basic today.

2. I'm not really sure what of significance Lutheran theological schools can do in relation to the black church—if anything—given the small number of black Lutherans in America, the lack of black students and faculty in your seminaries, the small-town and rural location of so many Lutheran seminaries, the traditional separation of Lutherans from certain kinds of ecumenical involvement, etc.

For both these reasons I hope you will regard this speech as an exploration with you of some ideas and concerns and an occasion in the ensuing discussion to follow up on your particular levels of interest and current activity.

I want to deal with three basic questions today. The first is: *What is the black church?* Just as you cannot talk about the Lutheran Church in North America, there obviously is not a single black church. Actually, there are almost as many divisions within black Protestantism as there are in the rest of American Christianity. We have to think, therefore, of black churches—and the title of this address should really read: "The Black Churches: Their Implications for Lutheran Theological Education." Let me try to clarify that for you.

We need to make two distinctions be-

tween black churches that cut across denominational lines and divisiveness. These distinctions are sometimes blurred, and I think may become increasingly blurred, but they are important to any real understanding of this sector of Protestantism.

One distinction has racial overtones and involves churches on the one hand that were the result of missionary activity by certain white denominations which helped to start churches for black people, provided them with some leadership and financial support, and included those churches on their rolls as a part of their denominational records. To all intents and purposes, these churches were like any other churches in those denominations.

On the other hand, there are the black Methodists and Baptists—those churches that grew out of the effort of black men themselves to develop and control their own religious life free from the interference or influence of white Protestants.

This distinction is important to keep in mind not only in defining the task of Lutheran seminaries but because the denominations controlled by blacks have always claimed they are the true repository of black Christianity in this country, having never attempted in their life and practice to imitate their white counterparts but always doing their own thing, and because their brethren in the white denominations have come to agree with that viewpoint. The current mood among black clergy in denominations like those represented here is to cease and desist from trying to relate to the white churches of even their own denominations, to recover their roots in the black American experience and consciousness, and ultimately to relate those roots to present conditions and future

hopes. In order to do this, they have begun to turn to their brethren in black denominations for understanding of those traditions and forms of worship. In a sense, they are on the verge of completely rejecting the modern liturgical movement among white people—particularly its content—as well as the history and traditions of European Christianity, and are trying to find a contemporary expression of the Gospel which takes seriously both the historical and existential context of being a black man in America. The new bridges of understanding and cooperation that they seek are with their brethren in black denominations, and they are spending less and less energy on cooperation with white people even in their own communions.

The underlying racial overtone that blurs this distinction is the unexpressed but growing conviction—particularly among black Christians in white denominations—that valid and faithful Christianity for the black man can only be found in affirmation of and participation in the black community and its ethos rather than in the white community.

The other distinction I want to make is even more blurred. It is between churches that have always understood themselves to be separated from the rest of American Protestantism and churches that have believed themselves to be essentially included in those circles.

The black Baptist and Methodist denominations have always known that they were not a vital part of American Protestantism—at least in the eyes of white people. They have always realized that the goal of integration was an illusory one for them. Indeed, they clearly recognized that their very survival depended on maintain-

ing their separated life. Despite the fact that American Protestantism has always paid very little attention to them and their life—and vice versa—these denominations claim most of the black Christians in America, 90 percent according to some figures. Thus, separation has been an underpinning of their success, and it is the reason I do not place too much hope in COCU even though it includes three Methodist black denominations.

On the other hand, up to this decade black ministers and their churches who were part of white denominations believed in and actively pursued the goal of integration—politically, socially, religiously. In the past couple of years, however, these men have come not only to realize but in some ways to accept the fact of their separation from the essential life of their denominations. They have seen that it is only myth that in any vital sense they are viable participants in the programs, policies, priorities, or decision-making processes of the communions to which they had given their allegiance. And the goal of integration, to which they had given their energies and their hopes, has become a meaningless aspiration. If integration has not been achieved in 100 years, what real hope is there that it will ever be a reality—particularly in view of the reluctance of white America to pursue that dream in any essential way? They know, you see, how this nation, North and South, has evaded the Supreme Court decision on public education; how it has backed off on housing, employment—indeed all the things that make possible a better life for black people. Not only so, these black churchmen realize that integration has always been understood by white people to mean the

inclusion of the black man in the white thing. But blacks believe they have their own thing, that it is vibrant and alive and beautiful. And, they assert, Christian life will never be valid or true in this country if black men deny their own thing—however it eventually comes to be defined—and simply take on the white coloration.

All this is an exceedingly long way of making an important point: that when you talk of the black churches in this country, you have to remember that there are two groups of churches—one owing much of its statistical strength and success to the fact of separation and proud of the tradition of immersion in the black condition, and the other newly aware of the dissolution of its dream and painfully trying to discover itself in relation to the only community it has known and in which it can hope to survive. Lutherans cannot hope to relate to black churches unless these distinctions are kept clearly in mind. I labor the point here because it should be clear from this definition that the implication for Lutheran seminaries is that it will be extremely difficult to relate to churches that, to a certain extent, glory in their separation. At the same time the opportunity to do very much in relation to black churches even in your own denominations is fast slipping away. This is the implication of this historical moment.

The second question is: *Why should Lutherans be concerned about black churches—even those black churches that are Lutheran?* I want to give you four reasons here. The first is *pragmatic*. It is no secret that a good many Lutheran churches in the cities are in trouble due to the flight of white people from the inner city. What is to become of those churches? At one

point in American church history denominational practice was to encourage local churches to sell their property to black congregations—usually at as much as the traffic would bear—and to build new churches in the suburbs. But the whole church building drive of the 50s is in trouble today. Too much criticism is leveled at putting large sums into brick and mortar in the face of desperate human need in our midst.

What to do? The more recent strategy is to try and find black pastors to take over these inner-city enterprises, before they die completely, in the hope of interesting the black people who have moved into the neighborhood in this presentation of Christianity. But this has not had any great success both because of the shortage of trained black clergy and because not enough blacks see any great advantage today in becoming a Lutheran or a Presbyterian or a Congregationalist. What do you really have to offer, they ask? And that question is going to plague you repeatedly in this discussion and in any other about black Christians and Lutheranism.

Just as an aside, it may interest you to know that in our survey of black seminarians for the 1967—68 academic year we discovered the following: Out of 96 member schools of the American Association of Theological Schools, 63 replied to our survey. Forty-three schools reported a total of 168 American black B.D.'s; 20 reported having none. In addition, we did not survey Howard and ITC, the only black AATS member schools, but between them they had a total of about 140 students that year. Thus it seems clear that only about 320 American blacks were enrolled in B.D. programs or their equivalent

in accredited schools in 1967—68. That means that only about 100 theologically trained black men are produced each year in the U.S. and Canada to provide for the black professional leadership needs of all the denominations. What I am trying to say here really, however, is that the policies and practices of Lutheran denominations form their own pragmatic bases for concern about black churches.

The second reason is *cognitive*. I am talking here about more than mere intellectual curiosity. All around the church revolutions are going on. One is the student revolution; a second is the black revolution; a third the moral revolution brought on by increased leisure, wealth, and drug use; a fourth is the space revolution; and so forth. All of these have their own built-in immediacy, and the church must find a way to relate to and understand each of them simultaneously. Each one is complex, but complexity cannot be the occasion for impotence.

In this kind of broad context, I believe Lutheran seminaries have a fundamental responsibility to themselves and their constituents—a responsibility that affects their survival—to know and understand what is taking place in the black revolution. And it is for this reason that I am sometimes appalled that white theological faculties in Lutheran seminaries and others read so little that black men are writing and listen to so few of the new black voices that are crying out in the wilderness of this nation. You don't have to agree with anything that these men are saying, but you ought to know and hear and understand what James Cone, Lawrence Jones, Albert Cleage, Eric Lincoln, George Kelsey, Preston Williams, Gayraud Wilmore, Leon Sul-

livan, Cain Felder, Metz Rollins, Joseph Washington, Kenneth Clark, Henry Mitchell, Winthrop Jordan, and John Hope Franklin are talking about—to read a list with some variety in it. You have a cognitive reason for concern about the black church.

The third reason is *fraternal*. At the very least it involves asking the question, What can white Christians do to help black Christians discover themselves both as human beings and as Christians? But fraternity cuts across denominational lines if the life of Jesus has any meaning at all, and we must go further and ask what Lutherans can do to help black Baptists and Methodists and Pentecostals in their search for self-hood. Neither of these questions is easy, given the mood of suspicion and the thrust toward separation among blacks today. James Foreman would say, "Give money. We'll do the rest!" But that is too easy an answer—even if any of you thought you had the money, and I don't know anybody who does.

I'm not going to give any specifics here, but I am reminded that when I was a pastor it wasn't so much what I had to say when I visited a home afflicted by tragedy. It was the fact of my presence and the visible indication of understanding, empathy, and love that I brought that was important. And I submit that the black churches, Lutheran, Baptist, Holiness, you name them, have rarely been aware of the white seminaries next door and have almost never had any visible manifestation of white faculty and students as those churches celebrated their joys and comforted themselves in their sorrows. Is the simple fact of your presence too small a thing to attract your attention?

The fourth reason for concern is *participatory*. It is a rather obvious fact that what one group of Americans does today has its effect upon another. The recent demonstrations in Pittsburgh are ample evidence of that: blacks pressing for construction jobs; whites demonstrating to protect their jobs. That is but one illustration of the variety of ways in which our lives impinge upon each other. The point I am trying to make is that it is to the self-interest of Lutherans to be involved in helping to produce leadership that can give direction to the creation of social change for blacks as well as in the process of change itself. Of course, that is true for all the revolutions I mentioned earlier. But I think it is particularly true of the black revolution, because on those two kinds of participation may rest the very survival of Lutheran churches in many of the major urban areas of the nation. So many cities seem destined to become largely black that participation in the black revolution at this stage becomes vital even though there are not very many black Lutherans to be found.

I have spent a good deal of time on what should be essentially background. But I think this has been a necessary discourse for two reasons: (1) because, in view of the small number of blacks in their membership, Lutheran seminaries will need to develop a rationale if the implications of this discussion are to eventuate in action; and (2) because I suppose I am trying to convince myself as well as you that there is real meat on the bones of this invitation to speak to you. But let's take for granted that this occasion is more than mere academic discussion or intellectual exploration, that you invited me here for a more

essential reason than the fact that black is in today—as a full page ad in a Monday *New York Times* had it. We are then faced with the question, *What can Lutheran seminaries do?* That, after all, is the ultimate question, I suppose.

By way of introduction to that question, let me call your attention to four pieces of literature of which, unfortunately, three are mine: an article in the October 1965 issue of *Theology Today* entitled "Crisis in Negro Church Leadership"; an article in the January 1969 issue of the *Crozer Voice* called "Implications of the Black Church for Theological Education"; an article in the spring 1969 issue of the Boston University School of Theology *Nexus* called "The Black Church and Theological Education"; and the Sept. 10, 1969, editorial in the *Christian Century*. Each of these pieces includes a great deal of material and ideas on what theological schools, including Lutheran schools, can do in the area of relating to the production of leadership for black churches. I will not repeat what they contain, but I hope you will read those articles as you think further on the subject.

There are four specific tasks that I want to mention here as holding possibilities for Lutheran follow-up to this discussion. Two of them, as you will see, relate to all of the seminaries. The other two relate only to a few Lutheran theological school-houses.

First, every Lutheran seminary has a *responsibility to help its white students and faculty to know about and understand what Black Christianity is all about*. It is evident that for a variety of reasons only a few of the Lutheran seminaries will ever have more than one or two black students. If you see the implications of the black

church only in terms of educating a few more black students, you will have missed the point of much that I have been saying. I believe that an equally important task is to find ways to acquaint your faculty, students, and ultimately your constituents with the facts of life about black Christians. You have both the opportunity and responsibility to do this.

How do you go about doing this? Let me just list briefly some possibilities without discussing them.

1. Include blacks in your list of regular, special, and convocation lecturers during the academic year. Hopefully, you will not be afraid to use controversial figures or those who do not have Ph.D.'s.
2. Include black speakers in your regular classroom activities as an addition to the expertise of your faculty.
3. Develop a section of your library on black Christianity by black authors and include bibliographical material by black authors in each course bibliography.
4. Examine course content of each catalogue course to see where and how the concerns of black Christians can be included.
5. Encourage faculty and students to do research projects on black Christianity in courses in church history, theology, social ethics, Biblical studies, religion and society, preaching, worship, and so forth.
6. Encourage students and faculty to develop formal and informal contacts with black churches and black community programs nearby.
7. Encourage students and faculty to understand and appreciate the worship life of black churches nearby.

8. Include black churchmen on your boards of trustees, and make sure they are visible to faculty and students during the academic year.

These suggestions do not exhaust the possibilities. They do offer some relevant means to assure that white students and faculty have new horizons of understanding opened to them.

Second, Lutheran seminaries *must make certain that the concerns and questions of black Christians find their way into the entire curriculum of the seminary*. I have already alluded to this in some of the suggestions just made, but in the article in the *Crozer Voice* I tried to delineate rather carefully what I call necessary inclusions in the regular curriculum as contrasted with subjects that form a body of additions to present subject matter. It is the viewpoint of many of us that every course in present theological curricula, with no exceptions, needs to be revised so that the kinds of viewpoints and questions which black men are dealing with are included in those courses. This means that New Testament, Old Testament, theology, ethics, and so forth, require the inclusion of both bibliography and classroom discussion of black authors and awareness of the viewpoints of black churches.

I won't elaborate that argument again here. Let me add as an aside, however, that this concept is of such importance that the Executive Committee of AATS at its June meeting authorized the calling of a mid-winter meeting, to which the deans and department chairmen of all theological schools will be invited, on the subject "Blackening Theological Education." The content of that meeting will be serious discussion of what is involved when the black

religious experience is carefully included in the standard theological curriculum of a seminary, and will be a discipline-by-discipline discussion of this idea.

Third, Lutheran seminaries in some localities can *begin more seriously to recruit black students and relate their training to the black religious experience*. This is a pretty big can of worms, and I call your attention here to the article in *Theology Today* I mentioned earlier. I won't go over all that again here, but I do want to indicate that you need to ask some very basic questions about a whole spectrum of things if any of you think seriously about recruiting black students.

Just so you will see what is involved, let me simply list for you a series of questions that point up the complexity of this idea and the breadth of the spectrum involved:

On finding students: Who is going to do the recruiting? Can white men effectively recruit black students today? If not, who can Lutheran seminaries find to recruit for them? Black alumni? Black pastors? Black seminarians? Where are you going to look for students—in the colleges around you or solely in black southern colleges? Are you willing to look for and spend money on non-Lutherans? Why should any black student attend a Lutheran seminary? What is there to attract him, what is there to hold him?

On admissions: How do present admissions policies affect recruitment of black students? Are certain practices—language requirements for instance—both prohibitive of and irrelevant to black students? How do College Board and/or Graduate Record Examination scores affect recruitment? What grade levels do you require? What subject matter that might stand in the way, such as philosophy? What are the attitudes of your admissions

committee and its clerical staff on the admission of blacks?

On *academic assistance*: What help do you provide for students who may have academic deficiencies at the time of admission? Is any clear pattern of tutorial assistance available? What kind of financial assistance for students is provided to enable them to devote full time to their studies, particularly if they have deficiencies? What kind of denominational aid is available to the seminaries so that they can provide adequate academic assistance and/or financial aid?

On the *seminary's curricular and extra-curricular program*: What in the curriculum provides for the academic interests of black students? What provides practical experience for the situations where they are apt to minister, that is, the black community? What is available to meet their social needs?

What can you or are you willing to do to provide assistance in *placement* for black graduates, particularly for non-Lutheran?

I haven't begun to exhaust all the questions that face you, but I am sure you can gather from all this that we are talking about a very complicated process. It is for this reason that I feel most of the Lutheran seminaries ought not to become deeply involved in trying to recruit black students. Not only will it be frustrating for the seminaries, but I am sure it will not be particularly beneficial for students involved.

All of this means that a hardheaded decision needs to be made which would involve a conscious agreement among Lutheran seminaries and denominational officials that instead of any seminary taking off to do recruiting of black students on its own, it must fit into a pattern of recruitment by certain specific seminaries. I

don't mean by that that any one of the schools should turn away qualified students. If they come to you, they should be carefully considered and should be told honestly what admission will mean for them and for the school. But you will not get many black students anywhere without considerable effort, and it is the limitation of haphazard, unclear, and well-meaning but paternalistic efforts that I am concerned about here. Of course, you will have to develop criteria for such a decision on recruiting. I really should not get involved in that—but I do suggest that such criteria ought to include the fact that centers for recruiting and training black students must be located in urban areas and located near the newly developing centers of black studies, secular and religious. Those are two essential needs if the contemporary black seminarian is to be adequately sought and trained.

Finally, one or two Lutheran seminaries *ought to be actively participating in the development of Black Church Studies Centers that are beginning to emerge*. Obviously, this is a suggestion limited to only a few Lutheran schools because not many are near such centers. But let me make some random points about this idea.

This is a suggestion aimed at both the need of white students and faculty for knowledge and understanding and at the opportunities for black students to relate to the black experience. It should not be thought of simply as a way of providing for the educational needs for blacks.

It is also a suggestion that relates to the conversations about clustering in which some Lutheran schools are presently engaged. I think it will be a serious mistake if clusters do not take into account at their inception the availability of black studies

programs in the universities or localities where the cluster is formed. Theological education in the United States has too long been representative of certain strains of Christian tradition. In the present drive to be ecumenical and broad, a way must be found to include not only Roman Catholics but fundamentalists, Pentecostals, blacks—all the long-neglected traditions, which today are often the only remaining area of numerical growth in American Protestantism. We ought to make certain, then, that there will be viable opportunities for clusters to relate not just to black secular studies but to the religious experience of blacks as well.

Again, let's be absolutely sure that the idea of black studies is addendum to the regular curriculum and not any sort of substitute for it. For the black student in particular this should mean extra work rather than substitution for present course material. Every graduate of a theological school requires the discipline and tools of the regular theological course, and we must resist all attempts to water down the skills that such graduates must develop.

Now, let me call your attention to the Sept. 10 issue of the *Christian Century*. The editorial lists Vincent Harding's six proposed standards for meaningful black studies programs. These can just as easily be applied to theological education and are another limiting factor to the involvement of any large number of Lutheran seminaries. These factors are:

1. a large and varied black student body (15 to 20 percent on predominantly white campuses).
2. a large and varied black community in the vicinity.
3. a curriculum "saturated with blackness"

rather than black studies as a peripheral compartment.

4. a variety of black faculty and staff as intellectual and vocational models.
5. an institutional commitment to the struggle for self-determination in the black community.
6. an institutional commitment to share resources (especially money) with black educational institutions under black control.

These four comments about what Lutheran seminaries can do in relation to the black church are in outline form only, but they offer some viable opportunities for future planning.

Let me close with just a very brief word about some developments that have been taking place in the past couple of months that raise other implications for all we have been saying here. There are three developments of note.

First, the AATS Executive Committee at its June meeting voted to seek \$20 million to be used for the development of black theological education and named the AATS Committee on Black Faculty and Curriculum as the agent to develop a concrete proposal which can be used as the basis for fund raising. It is hoped that the committee will address itself to the creation of a comprehensive national plan for Black Church Studies that would be a kind of black resources planning approach. It is hoped that some of the unnecessary or unwise duplication and the competition for a relatively small number of dollars can thereby be avoided as well as the chaos that now seems on the verge of happening.

The committee also hopes to develop a coherent model curriculum for Black Church Studies in order to give guidance

to the many persons and schools now interested in this kind of curriculum revision.

The *second* development is the grant of Sealantic Fund, Inc. in June to the Fund for Theological Education which will enable that fund to revise the Rockefeller Doctoral Program in Religion so as to support 12 outstanding black doctoral candidates in religion and cognate fields who aim at teaching at the collegiate or seminary level. The one clear need for manpower development at the seminary level is for black scholars in religious fields. For this reason the Rockefeller Program, which for 10 years has helped to produce scholars in religion, is now exclusively aimed at producing black men to meet what is a profound and critical shortage of manpower.

The *third* development is creation of an association of black religious scholars under the National Committee of Black Churchmen whose task it is to define and delineate black theology and to provide a professional context for continuing study and discussion of the black religious ex-

perience—particularly for black churchmen themselves. As you may know, the National Committee of Black Churchmen is the only viable forum that exists across the kinds of distinctions I mentioned at the beginning between black churches and its concern for professional and scholarly study, and discussion is a major step forward.

I began by saying that I was not sure what of significance Lutheran theological schools could do in relation to the black churches. As I finished writing this speech, it was apparent even to me that there are clear areas of activity—direct and indirect—by which Lutherans can become participants in the struggle of the black man for freedom and selfhood. The implications are clear. What remains is the willingness of your seminaries and your denominations to become brother to black Christians in that struggle, to know what the rhetoric is all about, and to help all of us achieve selfhood as God in Christ reveals that selfhood to us.

Princeton, N. J.