

Lecture 29 – “He That Overcometh”: The Black Church in America

“Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God” (Psalm 68: 31). “But that which ye have already hold fast till I come. And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works until the end, to him will I give power over the nations....I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star.” Revelation 2:25-26; 22:16

Background Reading

Gonzalez, ch. 25, pp. 250-53

Prayer

From Maria W. Stewart (1803-79), member of the First African Baptist Church of Boston, from *Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans*, ed. James Melvin Washington

“O, thou sin-forgiving God, they that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. Lord, I am sick, and full of diseases. If thou wilt, thou canst make me clean. Though my sins have been as scarlet, thou canst make them as wool; and though they be red like crimson, thou canst make them whiter than snow. Were it not that there is a sufficiency in thy blood to atone for the vilest, the view of my past sins and transgressions would sink me in despair. But thou hast said, him that cometh to thee, thou wilt in no wise cast out. Lord, I come, pleading alone the merits of my Redeemer; not only for myself do I plead, but for the whole race of mankind; especially for the sons and daughters of Africa.

“Bless thy churches throughout the world. Clothe thy ministers with salvation, and cause thy saints to shout for joy. Grant that the time may soon come, that all may know thee from the rising of the sun unto the going down thereof.

“And now, Lord, what wait I for? Dispel every gloomy fear that pervades my mind, and enable me to hope in thy mercy, and to thee will I ascribe praises everlasting. Amen.”

“He That Overcometh”: The Black Church in America

I. Slavery in America

A. Coming of the slaves

1. The slave trade

2. Opposition to slaver

a. Samuel Sewall (1652-1730)—*The Selling of Joseph* (1700): “Joseph was rightfully no more a slave to his brethren than they were to him, and they had no more authority to sell him than they had to slay him.”

b. John Woolman (1720-72) and the Society of Friends (Quakers)

c. Jonathan Edwards, Jr. (1745-1801)—Preaching on Matthew 7:12 (“The Golden Rule”): “This divine maxim is most properly applicable to the slave trade, and to the slavery of the Africans....the Africans are by nature equally entitled to freedom as we are; and therefore we have no more right to enslave, or to afford aid to enslave them, than they have to do the same to us.”

B. Early ministry among slaves

C. Opposition to evangelism

D. Conversion of the slaves

1. The First Great Awakening

a. Samuel Davies

Samuel Davies of Virginia writing to a New England friend: “There are also a number of Negroes [in my congregation]. Sometimes I see an hundred and more among my hearers (Psalm 68:31). I have baptized about forty of them

within these three years upon such a profession of faith as I then judged credible. Some of them, I fear, have apostatized; but others, I trust, will persevere to the end. I have had as satisfying evidences of sincere piety from several of them as I ever had from any person in my life, and their artless simplicity, their passionate aspirations after Christ, their incessant endeavours to know and do the will of God have charmed me. But alas! while my charge is so extensive I cannot take sufficient pains with them for their instruction, which often oppresses my heart.”

b. George Whitfield

2. Slave religion

3. “The dawn of a new day” (Carter Woodson)

Kenneth Scott Latourette: “All the extensive Protestant missionary effort of Europeans and Americans in Asia and Africa in the century between 1815 and 1914...resulted in no greater numerical gains than had been achieved among the Negroes of the United States in the same period” (*A History of the Expansion of Christianity* 4: 3217).

II. White Missions to Blacks

A. Charles C. Jones of Liberty County, Georgia

B. John Lafayette Girardeau of Charleston, South Carolina

III. “The Invisible Institution”

A. Secret black slave church in South

IV. Black Baptist Churches in the South

A. George Liele (c. 1750-1825/28) (“Letters from Pioneer Black Baptists”)

“I always had a spiritual fear of God from my youth, and was often checked in conscience with thoughts of death, which barred me from many sins and bad company. I knew no other way at the time to hope for salvation but only in the performance of my good works. About two years before the war the Rev. Matthew Moore, one Sabbath afternoon, as I stood with curiosity to hear him, unfolded all my dark views, opened my best behavior and good works by which I thought I was to be saved, and I was convinced that I was not in the way to heaven, but in the way to hell. This state I labored under for the space of five or sixth months. The more I heard or read, the more I saw that I was condemned as a sinner before God, till at length I was brought to perceive that my life hung by a slender thread, and if it was the will of God to cut me off at that time, I was sure I would be found in hell, as sure as God was in heaven. I saw my condemnation in my own heart, and I found no way wherein I could escape the damnation of hell, [but] only through the merits of my dying Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, which caused me to make intercession with Christ for the salvation of my poor immortal soul; and I full well recollect, I requested of my Lord and Master to give me a work. I did not care how mean it was, only to try and see how good I would do it.”

1. Pastor of the first black Baptist church in America at Silver Bluff, South Carolina, at some point between 1773 and 1775

2. Pastor of the First African Baptist Church in Savannah, Georgia

3. Missionary to Jamaica

B. Andrew Bryan (1737-1812) (“Letters from Pioneer Black Baptists”)

C. John Jasper (1812-1901)

V. Richard Allen (1760-1831) and the African Methodist Episcopal Church

A. Richard Allen (*Life Experience and Gospel Labours*)

B. “Old Mother Bethel” (1794)

C. AME founded in 1816

VI. Daniel A. Payne

A. AME Bishop

B. President, Wilberforce University, Ohio (first African American institute of higher education)

C. Expansion of AME in south

VII. Congregationalists and Presbyterians

A. Lemuel Haynes (1753-1833)—“Black Puritan on the Northern Frontier”

“When Paul and Barnabas were preaching at Antioch, as many as were *ordained* to eternal life believed....All the encouragement for a minister to preach among a people, so far as the salvation of souls ought to be a motive, is the doctrine of election” (from the sermon by Lemuel Haynes on “The Important Concerns of Ministers and the People of their Charge” [1798]).

B. John Chavis (1763-1838)—Presbyterian preacher and educator in the Antebellum South

C. Samuel Eli Cornish (1795-1858)—Presbyterian minister, editor, social reformer

D. Theodore Wright (1797-1847)—Graduate of Princeton Seminary and pastor of the First Colored Presbyterian Church, New York

VIII. The Dawn of Another New Day

Questions from Class

What was the Covenanters’ attitude toward slavery?

For Further Study

**Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* by Albert J. Raboteau

*“Slavery and Theology: The Emergence of Black Christian Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America,” by Timothy L. Smith, in *Church History* 41 (1972).

Smith, in this very important essay, identifies the themes of 19th century black Christianity as: “forgiveness, awe and ecstasy, self-respect, ethical earnestness, and hope.”

**Black Religion and American Evangelicalism* by Milton Sernett

**De Good Nyews Bout Jedus Christ Wa Luke Write: The Gospel According to Luke* (American Bible Society, 1995).

The Gospel of Luke is the first book of the Bible to be published in the Gullah language (or Sea Island Creole)—a “completely worthy [and] beautiful vehicle for the conveyance of God’s Good News.” Gullah is spoken by some black people over a wide portion of the southeastern United States coastal area.

A. Read the “Letters from Pioneer Black Baptists”—George Liele and Andrew Bryan. Note George Liele’s testimony of his salvation (pages 44 and 45) and his immediate ministry to his fellow slaves (page 45).

*How would you describe Liele’s treatment by whites?

*Note especially his brief statement of faith on page 47. How would you describe his theology?

*What strikes you as especially interesting or significant in the letter from Andrew Bryan?

B. Read some selections from *The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*.

Notice Richard Allen’s relationship with his master, his attitude toward slavery, and his acceptance as a preacher among white people. On page 142 Allen relates the famous story of how he and two brothers were forced out of their seats at St. George’s Methodist Church in Philadelphia, and—as he wrote—“we all went out of the church in a body, and they were no more plagued with us.” This was the beginning of Bethel (“Old Mother Bethel”) Church and the African Methodist Episcopal denomination.

C. Lemuel Haynes was well-known in his time for his sermons. In a sermon entitled “Universal Salvation,” he powerfully defended orthodox Calvinism against universalism. Read the sermon by Lemuel Haynes: “Divine Decrees.”

*How does Haynes use Hebrews 11:32 to preach on the “Divine Decrees”? What is his main point or proposition? What are his three points?

*Does Haynes make any exception to the government and control of God? Does God cause sin?

- *How does Haynes argue that the “people of God do believe, and confide in his absolute government”?
- *Why are those who believe in divine providence diligent in the use of means?
- *In good Puritan style, Haynes closes his sermon with application or what he calls “improvement.”
- *Notice how he turns the sermon at the end to a missionary appeal. Why does he do this?