

Article: JAB425

IS CHRISTIAN ORTHODOXY STRONG IN THE BLACK CHURCH?

This article first appeared in the Viewpoint column of the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 27, number 4 (2004). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

Based on my experience as an African-American pastor, teacher, and speaker at various Black churches, it is my opinion that the Black church in America today does not have a strong commitment to Christian orthodoxy in doctrine and practice. I will share eight reasons why I think this is the case.

The leading reason for a lack of Christian orthodoxy in the Black church is that its pastors lack a formal orthodox theological education. On one hand, the majority of Black pastors, for reasons that will be discussed below, have no Bible college or seminary training at all. These pastors, uneducated in Christian orthodoxy, nevertheless are highly respected by their congregations as teachers of theology.

On the other hand, many of those Black pastors who do have a formal theological education were educated at theologically liberal schools. There was a time in America when conservative Christian colleges and seminaries did not welcome Black students. This unfortunate situation existed even as late as the 1960s and caused the few Blacks who could afford a formal education to go to liberal colleges and seminaries. These liberal schools have aggressively recruited Blacks through the years. Many Blacks, moreover, cannot afford an education at a conservative Bible college or seminary where the tuition is often high. Liberal schools have given out more scholarships than conservative schools; consequently, there are a number of liberal Black theologians today who have written books that have influenced people in the Black church away from orthodoxy. Liberalism, therefore, has become very evident in the Black church.

Second, pastors who have not had a formal theological education are mentoring many young Black ministers in doing ministry. This has caused a chain reaction in the Black church from one generation to the next. These young Black ministers are falling into the same patterns of teaching unorthodox doctrine and practice as their mentors. The cycle has to be broken. This is where affluent evangelical churches and conventions can step up and provide opportunities for young Black ministers to attend conservative Bible colleges and seminaries that can train them in Christian orthodoxy, thus assisting them to change the current patterns.

Third, one of the fundamental problems in the Black church has been a lack of discipleship training. Most Black pastors not only lack formal theological education, but they have not been discipled in the basic truths of the Christian faith even by another pastor or teacher. The result is that even the most basic Christian doctrine is not being taught in many Black churches. Discipleship training is essential if there is to be Christian orthodoxy in the Black church. It must begin with the pastors and extend down to the entire church membership.

A fourth and important reason for the lack of Christian orthodoxy in the Black church is the lack of focus on teaching Christian doctrine. The essential doctrines of the historic Christian faith such as the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the vicarious atonement of Christ, the bodily resurrection of Christ, and the second coming of Christ are not being strongly taught in most Black churches. I've found, for example, that most churches where I've taught the doctrine of the Trinity have not previously been educated on this doctrine. Many Black churches don't even have a written statement of faith. There is no training on the essentials of the Christian faith. It's not enough just to preach about the crucifixion and that Jesus saves; all the essentials of the Christian faith have to be taught. Jesus preached to unbelievers *and* He taught believers. In the typical Black church, however, the pastor preaches to believers but doesn't really teach anyone.

Fifth, the lack of emphasis on Christian essentials in the Black church has opened the door for groups with cultic, aberrant, or heretical teaching to enter. Some of these groups include Word-Faith teachers, Oneness Pentecostal groups, and counterfeit revival groups. When Black pastors lack the training needed to recognize theological error, they compromise themselves and their congregations by fellowshipping with those who do not hold to sound Christian doctrine. This is why education is so critical. Historically, the Black church has emphasized social issues, including racism and poverty. When there is a lack of training and discernment, the church can easily join hands with aberrant or even cultic groups that embrace these same issues. In the area of poverty, for example, the Word-Faith teachers emphasize health and wealth. This way of thinking attracts many in the Black church who have lived with poverty all their lives. Guaranteed prosperity sounds very attractive. In the area of racism, many people in the Black church who claim to be Christians have joined forces with unorthodox teachers and groups such as Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam in activities such as the Million Man March. They do these things in the name of justice, but in the process, they have laid aside their doctrinal beliefs and instead lent credibility to these teachers and groups and provided a platform for them to spread unorthodox teaching.

Sixth, the majority of Black pastors are not adequately available to fulfill their roles as ministers. Most of them have to work a full-time job along with pastoring. Many work 40 hours or more per week in addition to their ministry responsibilities. It is the exception, not the rule, when a Black pastor doesn't have to work another job along with pastoring. Pastors are not able to preach, teach, evangelize, or counsel adequately if they are gone from the church working other jobs.

Seventh, there are too many auxiliary programs and activities in the Black church. Many of these programs are focused on tradition rather than on God, and the church's energy ends up being spent on mere activity rather than on the real work of Christ. Most Black pastors extend the right hand of fellowship to new members and then ask with which auxiliary they want to work. There is no mention of salvation, soul winning, Christ, or doctrinal orientation. The church has plenty of programs, but it has lost its mission.

There is also too much focus on socializing — having dinners, selling dinners, and so on. These social activities, moreover, are often mixed with non-Christian practices such as Eastern Star and Masonry, which can kill sound doctrine in a church. The church is often involved in so many things other than essential Christianity that the work of the Holy Spirit in the church is hindered. People can't grow in sound Christian doctrine and practice without the Holy Spirit working in their lives. There needs to be balance and discernment when running these auxiliary programs in order for the Black church to fulfill its mission of ministering to the body and reaching out to the needs of the community.

A final reason for a lack of orthodoxy is that the Black church has placed too much of an emphasis on the number of baptisms rather than actual converts and disciples. This emphasis, which is found in certain denominations as well, encourages an unhealthy spirit of competition among churches, in which visible evidence of growth — measured in the number of baptisms — is all important. If a church experiences the lowest number of baptisms in its association or convention, it makes the pastor look bad. A pastor can even be put out of his church if it doesn't have a certain number of baptisms each year. The vital teaching and training of individual converts is often overlooked, therefore, because the pastor is too preoccupied with the number of baptisms.

How can Christian orthodoxy become strong in the Black church? I see a multi-faceted solution. The evangelical White church needs to get more involved with the Black church by helping Black pastors to be adequately educated and disciplined. Scripture commands the church to do this in 2 Timothy 2:15. The evangelical White church could help provide financial scholarships for Blacks who cannot afford to attend evangelical Bible colleges and seminaries. Black pastors need to be educated so they can in turn educate and disciple their congregations. Sound education and discipleship will help break the current cycle of unsound doctrine among pastors. Christian orthodoxy will become stronger in the Black church through education and discipleship of its members as well. The Black church has an obligation to institute discipleship programs in addition to baptism. Both are part of the Great Commission. It is important for

new members to participate in auxiliary programs, but more important, they must participate in discipleship training classes. In order for Christian orthodoxy to be strong in the Black church, it is vitally important that its members, especially new members, learn the essentials of the historic Christian faith. A strong foundation will also help them not to be deceived by aberrant and heretical groups and teaching. My mentor Dr. Walter Martin once said, "You have to become so familiar with the original that when the counterfeit passes by you, you will be able to detect it immediately." This familiarity with and practice of orthodox Christian doctrines is what builds a strong, well-balanced, and healthy church. Education provides the key for success in this area in the Black church.

— *Jerry L. Buckner*

NOTES

We would like to thank *Journal* reader Keith L. Tolbert for suggesting this topic for a Viewpoint article.