

Effective Evangelism: JAE405

## REACHING AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN WITH THE GOSPEL

by Eric C. Redmond

This article first appeared in the Effective Evangelism column of the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 40, number 5 (2017). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

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Often I am invited to speak in evangelical settings where I know the audience is missions-minded and has a concern for evangelizing people groups outside of the United States. The audience has an expressed passion for seeing the church planted in all lands and Scripture translated into the languages of all six billion people without the gospel.

In these settings, I find it most important to say, "African American men might be one of the most unreached people groups existing today."<sup>1</sup> I pause for people to consider what I am proposing, and then I follow up with, "In all of your efforts to be obedient to the Great Commission, have you shared the gospel with an African American man within your spheres of influence?"

More significant than the initial shock from my statements is the confession from an honest listener who says, "I just don't know what to say to my African American coworker [or neighbor or fellow student]. I do not know how to enter his life."

I appreciate and understand the confession in light of the shadowy history of racial division in America, and even more in the wake of recent events simply known by their characters and places: Trayvon, Ferguson, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, the Charleston Nine. I also know that there are individuals who hesitate to act because they feel they will not have the ability to answer ethnically based objections to the gospel that might arise in a conversation with an African American man.

Here are a few insights to help create a positive setting for gospel discussions with unbelieving African American men. I designed the insights to answer concerns that might have painted the gospel in a bad light, in order to gain a hearing for the gospel and for getting a man to a worship service. In evangelistic conversations, rarely do we simply share the story of God's plan to rescue sinners through Christ; we also answer questions people have when they are uninformed or skeptical about Christianity.

It is important to remember that African Americans are associated with perceptions that lead some to question God's goodness in the face of apparent, race-related evils. For example, some African American men see themselves as disenfranchised from American prosperity.<sup>2</sup> Research findings demonstrate that huge wage, wealth, employment, and education gaps exist between African American men and people of the majority culture in America.<sup>3</sup> Given how long this disparity has existed, it is reasonable for an African American man to ask, "Where is the Christian's God in bringing about economic justice?"

In addition to perceptions created by the American socioeconomic setting, the American media often depicts African American men with negative stereotypes. Nightly news segments rarely show the loving African American father or the hard-working young African American scholar. Instead, they often are filled with pictures of black male crime suspects figure deficient in his use of the King's English. The man to whom you intend to explain the gospel understands that you might view him through these repeated, undesirable portrayals of African American men. When speaking to an African American man, your body language and facial expressions must communicate acceptance of that man as a person made in the image of God, lest the stereotypical depictions stand in the way of hearing the gospel.

When my wife and I go to our children's schools to meet with their teachers or administrative personnel, I wear a dark-colored suit with a shirt and tie. I greet the host with a firm handshake, look the host directly in the eyes, and speak with the clearest voice, strongest tone, and most articulate use of words. The intent of my dress, posture, and words is to make a positive first impression — one that would be strong enough to overcome any initial negative stereotyping that might otherwise occur.

Recently I wore a sport coat and bowtie to a ministry conference and knew I was overdressed in comparison to the other attendees. However, I anticipated being the only African American man present in the conference and in the suburb where the conference was presented. In the town, if I had dressed as the other attendees, I could not be sure that I would be treated with respect.

In contrast, some African American men with whom you will share the gospel will not have such strategies and means at their disposal. You, however, must be aware of your own perceptions and of theirs as well. Communicate respect and honor so the man does not need to question your assumptions about him being African American. Once you are aware of the problem of perceptions, then consider four other apologetic concerns relevant to African American men.

**Prepare to answer the charges that Christianity is "white," or that African American pastors are scam artists.** Some African Americans have asked me about the credibility of the African American preacher, or proposed that the practices of the Nation of Islam appear to be superior to that of Christianity. When such questions arise, offer to your skeptic a mini-lesson in church history. Invoke the names of *Rufus and Alexander, the Ethiopian Eunuch*, and *Niger*, figures of African descent in the New Testament who were on the ground floor of the early church as leaders, prophets, and teachers. Add that

some of the early theologians important to historic, orthodox theology, including Tertullian, Athanasius, Chrysostom, and Augustine, were from North Africa, not Europe.

Also, be candid about the problem of visible sin in the lives of popular preachers and church musicians in the African American community and the majority community as well. This includes a lack of marital fidelity and/or living a life of greed at the expense and impoverishment of others. Forthrightly say that such men should be held to a higher standard, that the sins of a few high-profile people do not negate the faithful Christianity of millions of people whose lives have been transformed by Christ, that all persons stand guilty of sin before God, and that Christianity offers gradual growth into Christlikeness — not instant perfection.

**Clarify to him that he can maintain African American life as a believer even as people of other ethnicities do in their cultures as believers.** Race and cultural identity are huge issues for African Americans in general and African American men especially. African American churchgoers, by and large, attend predominantly African American churches rather than multicultural churches. By means of conjecture, it is understood commonly that the African American church is a place where African Americans can hold positions of leadership, speak in cultural tones that fellow worshippers understand without feeling the need to explain themselves, and can celebrate with expressions different from majority culture without being viewed as sub-Christian or lower-class by others. In other words, African Americans congregate together because they can enjoy being African American while worshipping. It is important that biblically based expressions within African American culture be separated clearly from sinfully unacceptable practices or beliefs, or you may erect an unnecessary offense to Christian belief.

**Simply befriend a man with sustained friendship before making him a target of a gospel presentation.**<sup>4</sup> African American men spend much of their lives being objectified: the extraordinary athlete beneficial to a team, the at-risk youth who needs tutoring, the man raised in a home without a father, the poor beggar who steals for a living, the protester who quickly turns violent, the token who provides diversity for an organization, the “Uncle Tom” who turns his back on his people, and other such archetypes. Rather than be objectified, an African American man, like any person, simply wants to be valued for his unique person. He is the hard-working father or son needing a relationship with Christ. To keep from objectifying such a man means that one must get to know the goals, dreams, family history, likes, dislikes, successes, failures, joys, and fears of that person.

Befriend an African American man and begin to eat meals with him. Invite his family to spend time with your family in your settings, and offer to do the same with his family in their settings. Read what he reads, and eat what he eats. Without criticism, ask him questions about things germane to African American life, and show that you care about his person — that you are ready to extend to him the love of Christ.

Hopefully, with much prayer and great mercy from God, you might see your friend become open to hear the gospel, and eventually place his hope of salvation in Christ.

**Proclaim a God of justice when speaking of the righteousness of God.** In some gospel presentations, the concept of God's justice concerns only the righteous treatment of sin on the part of God. Yet God's justice is a much larger topic than one's legal standing before God. In Christ, God provides justice for all wrongs in this life, including wrongs experienced in a country that historically discriminates against African Americans. Raising the issue of justice in a society of injustices allows the gospel to be viewed as relevant and practical on its own merit. You would be opening the door for the man to ask you how the gospel affects his culture positively. —*Eric C. Redmond*

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## NOTES

1. "A Religious Portrait of African Americans," Pew Research Center, January 30, 2009, <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/01/30/a-religious-portrait-of-african-americans/>. My claim remains tentative, as polls do not measure true or false Christian belief. Two social indicators suggest a lack of conversions, although some may suggest lack of discipleship and/or social injustice might be reflected: (1) between 66–72 percent of all African American households are headed by single women, and (2) in 2013, 745,000 African American men were behind bars.
2. "On Views of Race and Inequality, Blacks and Whites Are Worlds Apart," Pew Research Center, June 27, 2016, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/06/27/on-views-of-race-and-inequality-blacks-and-whites-are-worlds-apart/>.
3. Laura Cameron, "Achievement Gap between White and Black Students Still Gaping," *US News and World Report*, January 13, 2016, <https://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/data-mine/2016/01/13/achievement-gap-between-white-and-black-students-still-gaping>; Gillian B. White, "Black Americans Are Working More with Little to Show for It," *The Atlantic*, March 29, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/03/black-wages-labor/521172/>.
4. This statement does not restrict one from discerning point-in-time, divinely appointed evangelism opportunities for sharing the gospel. It is the gospel, not our means of presentations, that is the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16).