

TWO SEMINARIES OR ONE: A PLEA FOR A BLACK-WHITE DIALOGUE ON THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

by William H. Myers

Monologue in Politics

The recent Democratic National Convention was a perfect illustration of the lack of black-white dialogue in politics. Jesse Jackson did not succeed in his objective, irrespective of the media claims to the contrary. Yes, he made us all feel proud and he made history. But, was that his primary objective or even a secondary objective? It is highly unlikely when one considers this trained seminarian's background.

Jesse and those blacks who voted for him sought dialogue, not history or a proud feeling. When blacks all over this nation voted for Jesse it was not a repudiation of Hart or Mondale. Implicit in this vote was a repudiation of monologue. It was not so much a vote against Mondale (a black favorite) as much as a vote for genuine dialogue. The message was clear. We desire choices that allow fruitful black-white dialogue. Since past history demonstrates the white penchant for monologue on political matters that affect blacks, we chose on this occasion to send a dialogic messenger who carried a dialogic message. No black person expected that his vote would catapult Jesse into the "White" House. However, his vote was viewed as a demand to be heard and a plea for black-white dialogue in politics.

This is why, unfortunately, both Andrew Young and Coretta King were booed by black delegates. At the minimum the delegates went to the convention with the hope of receiving a message that a black-white dialogue would occur, and they would not hear anyone who would suggest that they should forfeit that right yet again in silence and acquiescence. Sadly, Jesse left in the same state in which he came (as it relates to the objective) — with a white monologue on politics.

There was obvious dialogue between the Democratic party and Gary Hart, the South and women. But in Jesse's case the monologue continued in response to each issue he raised: "Do it our way and your turn will come down the road!" Obviously, the Democratic party felt that the female vote was crucial and non-sacrificial, for women could turn to the Republicans in 1980. But, to whom could the black race turn to? In effect the Democrats perception was that blacks have no acceptable line of default and therefore Jesse was sacrificial.

This, as I see it, is a classic "political" example of how the Democrats failed to seize the opportunity for black-white dialogue. The gender move sought to mitigate it, but it was more avoidance than mitigation.¹

Although this occurrence on the political scene is disturbing, there is a similar matter that is even more disconcerting. This same black-white dichotomy permeates the Church in the area of theological education. As Christians we expect to see many things occurring in the world, but how is it so easy for us to accept them in the Church?² More specifically, I speak of a white monologue and the failure to incorporate a black-white dialogue within the theological education system.

Dichotomies in Church History

The black-white division is not the first dichotomy that the Church has faced in its history. During the apostolic period there was the Jew-Gentile dichotomy. Paul's sensitivities and spirit were heightened to the point that he was able to see that it was the death knell to the Christian Church. The allowance of a Jewish Church and a Gentile Church was to admit to no Christian Church at all.³ We are all very familiar with how Paul stood resolutely at the Jerusalem Council and on other occasions on behalf of the Gentiles and in favor of one Church, not two.

Paul stood face-to-face with the "pillars of the church" in active dialogue and declared to them that their theology and their conduct was wrong if they accepted this divisive dichotomy. He did not sit in "silence" nor look the other way (thereby condoning their attitude by default). When it became necessary he even faced the titular "pillar" regarding his own conduct on the matter.⁴

A second divisive factor has been that of the *kleros-laos* (clergy-laity) controversy.⁵ A careful study of this dichotomy suggests that the separation of these two terms was introduced first by Clement of Rome in A.D. 95⁶ The chasm widened until the "high water mark" of the Reformation period closed it with the concept of the "priesthood of all believers." Since that time there has been frequent nominal attempts at closing the gap such that at present we have a great emphasis on the ministry of all the people of God (*laos*) which seeks to eliminate this particular dichotomy in the Church. The movement seeks to do this by placing the emphasis in this controversy where it belongs. That is, on the gifted's ability to function, not on office or status.⁷

Other dichotomies are the Protestant-Catholic and conservative-liberal splits. However, let me suggest that these have led to a most prominent dichotomy today in the conservative ranks of the Christian family. It is the "true" evangelical versus the quasi-

evangelical dichotomy.⁸ It can be observed today in a most heated fashion on such issues as inspiration and inerrancy, the historical-critical method and hermeneutical methods, techniques, and presuppositions.⁹ At the core of much of this controversy is the criteria for bearing the tag of "evangelical."

Monologue in the Theological Education System

My concern at present is with the failure of the theological academic community (seminaries, accrediting associations, etc.) in general to enter into sincere black-white dialogue regarding the structure of theological education. As a result I have observed an increasing attitude that is building toward two seminaries instead of one. Isn't it enough that we must have black churches and white churches, Catholic churches and Protestant churches, Penecostals and Reformed, Methodist and Baptists that ignore one another? Must we continue to compound the problem of separatism? Shall we become even more divisive by forcing this matter to its ultimate dichotomous conclusion? Or shall we seize the opportunity to make a giant leap forward by entering into a truly participative black-white dialogue?

There are many black pastors, ministers and laymen today seeking theological training on a seminary or near-seminary level, but are not receiving it because they perceive the white seminary as unwilling to include them in the process which determines method, technique and structure that includes their unique contextual situation.¹⁰ Therefore many are pressing for their own black community seminaries. My Doctor of Ministry dissertation and research (which includes the development of such a center) documents how prevalent this type of center is for black and whites of all denominations and how the driving force behind it is more laymen than clergy.¹¹ It also suggests, however, how few theological seminaries were involved in providing this type of service in the first place, thereby forcing these types of centers to fill the gap. It also demonstrates how theological seminary systems contribute to this black-white dichotomy either actively or by default.¹²

Is there a way out?

On this subject I feel compelled to go my own way, in spite of the opinions of black theologians, many who will certainly disagree with me but whose opinions I value nonetheless. I don't consider Black Studies courses or Black Studies programs as the answer.¹³ This is not to be construed as a repudiation, denigration or questioning of their importance or usefulness. However, it skirts the real issue just as surely as the apostles (except Paul) failed to con-

front Peter ("a pillar of the church").

After all, how many white seminarians will attend courses that are entitled Black _____? Shall we then congregate a group of blacks in a class to discuss problems that they are well aware of but unable to solve alone? I choose not to follow some that would make these courses mandatory for whites. This would generate more of a negative response than a cooperative effort in trying to bring about true reconciliation. Our method should be persuasion of the righteousness of this position as supported by the Scriptures which leads to an embracing of this position because they are convinced not forced.¹⁴

Therefore, include Black Theology in Contemporary or Christian Theology, Black Church History in Church History, Black Church Administration in Church Administration and Black Preaching in Homiletics. For in the final analysis there is neither a Black Theology or White Theology but God's Theology; neither is there a Black or White Church History, but the Church's History and so on and so on. What we have is such a diversity of experiences, expressions and unique emphases that when one is left out Theology, Church History, Homiletics are incomplete. Unfortunately, the very necessary emphasis on Black Theology, History and Preaching by black theologians, historians and homileticians resulted as a reaction to the incompleteness of these divisions in the course of study.

If theological education is done as I have outlined above then black and white together are exposed to the *whole* Church and can help to inform each other through their varied experiences. From this comes exposure of the diversity of liturgy, homiletical style and skill, leadership approach, theology and hermeneutical presupposition that exists in the whole Body. The greater the exposure in all divisions of theological study the more we will loosen the dogmatism and ignorance that exist. In this way we can begin to see and appreciate that the learning process is not one-sided. After all, we take this approach with our liberal brothers (at least some of us do) — why not with our black brothers? We might just find out that we can learn something about hermeneutics from the Black Church by discovering that their approach to interpretation of the Scriptures is not as simplistic as the terms "fundamentals" and "literal" imply.

To enhance this experience the classroom instructor might bring in practitioners in these areas of specialty and/or accomplish it through reading and research assignments. The complaint of many blacks is that either it is not included at all or that it is so watered down that it fails to appreciate the black differences on an equal basis.¹⁵

The failure to implement such a structure is quite evident in the ethnocentric attitudes and unChristian conduct of many white

seminarians toward their black counterparts in class. Unfortunately, they are often unaware of just how overt and obvious their actions are. A slight elbow, a fixation with a remote object, casual conversation while others speak, and utter disgust on their face with the black that has been adjudged below the white's standards are but a few of their obvious mannerisms. Blacks are quite sensitized to these mannerisms after more than 200 years of it in all other sectors of life. It is lamentable that it should be seen in the highest educational institution of the Church. It is even more lamentable that it is to be seen in the very actions of those being trained to go out as "change agents" among those who act this way as a normal and accepted way of life. One has to wonder what kind of changes will take place and what the seminarian's actions or silence will convey to those whom they will lead? For a most prevalent foundational basis for perpetuation of black-white division is ignorance which is often due to silence and distortion.

Now that I have addressed curriculum, the matter of context needs to be approached. In our academic realm there is frequently talk about forcing the student to seminary campuses so that he might be introduced to the spiritual atmosphere of campus life. One might ask just what kind of superior enhancement exists in mandates that trickle down from "on high" by those who have little knowledge of or sensitivity to the real world of many seminary student bodies? What kind of spiritual enhancement occurs in one locale over another especially when it fails to take into consideration the differences of black seminarians? What about bi-vocational pastors, heavy pastoral responsibilities, cost, travel time and mixture of student body? How do these considerations measure against an unproven spiritual enhancement on some remote predominantly white campus engendered by the insensitive dictates of some body who is not in touch with the real world of ministry? Who needs the most exposure to the other's milieu and mores? Is it the black who has been introduced to the white dominated structures in all sectors of our society all of his life in a predominantly monologic manner? Or is it the white who has very rarely been introduced to the problems, manner of thinking and mores of the black structure in a dialogic theological setting?¹⁶

It is usually at this point that the concepts of "evangelistic mission" and "pastoral concern" are invoked. It is insisted that ministers are proclaimer's of the word and are to be concerned with taking care of their congregations. Certainly, this is true, but it is only part of the truth. One might ask what happened to the "prophetic word" and what happened to the exhortations to the congregation about unChristian conduct and attitudes as a part of pastoral concerns and care?¹⁷

Two Seminaries or One

We must ask whether it is just our curriculum that makes our education system different than the secular system? Shall we project the same image as that of our counterparts in secular higher educational institutions? Or, is it our mission that sets us apart, because we view it as ministry? Hopefully, we will reject any "ivory tower theology" and any abstract pedagogical structure that is so implacable it fails to be relevant to the needs of those we serve. Herein lies the key. Whom do we serve and how well are we serving Him and them? When we cease to see our seminaries as a calling to a *ministerium dei* for the *matheton theou* we cease to be anything different than a secular educational institution.

This must as a prerequisite require an ongoing flexibility in our structure that allows for modifications that will help us meet the needs of those that are left out because of inflexible and introverted structures. Jesus never created a structure nor failed to condemn any approach that was so rigid in its religiosity (attitude, action, method, system or structure) that it excluded those in need.¹⁸ This should be especially true for those who find themselves left out, struggling or near drowning through a tremendous historical burden which consists of a mixture of economic, social, educational or ministerial deprivation through no fault of their own. Forced to run in the sand for decades while their counterparts ran on cinder they are suddenly thrust upon the cinder track and told to run equally with their counterparts. When a rare few adapt quickly enough to run just as fast, it becomes justification for leaving the masses behind.

Now, I must not lay an unequal share of the blame on the seminaries without placing due blame at the doorsteps of administrators of accrediting associations and denominational headquarters. Some of these people remain quite remote from the real world of practical ministry and are quite unconcerned with the contextual problems facing pastors attending seminary. The inflexibility in their structures as they sit in their ivory towers setting up "straw men" (i.e. quality education) to hide behind while failing to consider equally important contextual needs has contributed directly to the failure of many seminaries in fulfilling their mission.

It is this seemingly intransigent catch 22 (rigidity of accrediting associations and the accredited seminaries's desire to maintain accreditation)¹⁹ that has caused many black theologians, pastors, educators and laymen to suggest that the only solution is two seminaries. From my perspective the two seminary concept takes on more than one form. It can be full-fledged seminaries like Morehouse, Virginia Union and I.T.C., or Black Studies programs

in white seminaries that are predominantly black attended, or black community centers, institutes, or church programs. The message being sent by all of these is that we need something of our own because we have been left out. History has shown the proponents of this view that a black-white dialogue that is totally open, sensitive and leads to effective action is highly unlikely. The Church is just as slow in making racial adjustments as the world is on other economic, social, educational and political matters.

What I find the most disturbing is the obvious silence²⁰ and uneasiness of white theologians, practitioners and seminarians to talk about it. James D. Smart wrote a book nearly 15 years ago entitled *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church* which is a study in hermeneutics. I find a peculiarly enigmatic silence on racial attitudes in the church and seminaries today. And, if it is not addressed by the Body of Christ and in the church, then where will it be addressed? Is this uneasiness and silence due to unfamiliarity? Or, unconcern? Or, agreement? Or, fear of offending the "pillars" of the church? There is no such uneasiness or silence among this same group when different opinions on biblical authority, inerrancy, or historical-critical method are posited. There is ample dialogue on these issues, but the silence on black-white issues is similar to that of the world. If we are silent long enough *maybe* the problem will go away or the other side will stop talking about it. Another approach is the insistence that we have come a long way and made a lot of progress. "Your turn is coming!"

It is this type of attitude towards the issue that creates the greatest amount of outrage from a black perspective. It is because I know that few *really* want to hear what I am saying here that pains me the most in writing this article. The fact that it will fall on mostly deaf ears in the Body of Christ that cherishes so dearly the term "prophetic" is an indescribable lament. The cry is always "don't rock the boat" (e.g. criticize the structure or system) or you will slow down the progress.

Unfortunately, being put off is no longer acceptable to many. My fear is that we are headed in the direction of two seminaries and, without question, both sides will be the losers. There is, however, too much intransigence on the white side and too great a need on the black side which is pressing us inexorably in that direction. Unless rhetoric ceases and a fruitful black-white dialogue occurs it is already a *fait accompli*. It is a most lamentable state of affairs for God's chosen masterpiece of reconciliation, unity, care and concern for the needs of others to be projecting such an image in its most vital institution. The Scriptures speak too much about unity and Jesus suffered, bled and died for it. Paul went to jail, suffered immensely and risked losing invaluable friendships with the "pil-

lars of the church.” And, Paul wrote some of the most painful as well as lofty letters in support of reconciliation and the *one* true Church, not two. With such a tradition passed on to us how can we allow this division to plague our theological systems? I cannot accept that two seminaries of this nature are better than the one mandated and described in the Scriptures.

This is not to say that certain distinct types of educational institutions are wrong in and of themselves and should cease to exist. We will probably have denominational seminaries until the Lord returns. They are fine as long as they are talking to one another, accepting and informing one another in open dialogue. The freedom of students to cross denominational lines as they choose for broader educational exposure in the Christian family is invaluable.

This is also true of certain types of community training that cannot be done in any other way.²¹ But it is when institutions emerge as a result of any group being left out and their needs unmet by those in a position to help that warning signals should be heard. When we fail to enter into dialogue regarding this matter, then we have lost sight of what the ministry of theological education is about.²² God forbid that we should fail to seize the opportunity for fruitful black-white dialogue on theological education and continue to hamper the Body of Christ through division in our highest and most important educational system.²³

FOOTNOTES

¹The party could have addressed both race and gender by choosing someone like Barbara Jordan if they really had concern for both.

²James Earl Massey, “The Relational Imperative.” *Spectrum* 47 (July, 1971), p. 15 says that “the suffering of Black Americans has caused them to ask why it comes from the very hands of those who have been trustees and guardians of the Christian message. And the Black American’s experience also continues to be a living rebuke against theological systems that do not speak to concrete situations of human need.”

³See especially the Ephesian and Galatian epistles.

⁴Gal. 2:11ff.

⁵Technically, although we often trace our English terms laity and clergy to these two terms, both of them refer to “all of the people of God.” Consult the standard lexicons and theological dictionaries for more details.

⁶In I Clement 40:6, Glenn E. Hinson, ed., *Christian Classics: The Early Church Fathers*. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1980). Clement of Rome was the first to associate the term laymen with the term LAIKOS instead of LAOS. The classical meaning of LAIKOS is uneducated, inarticulate people whereas LAOS generally has the meaning “people of God” LAIKOS is never used in Scripture. However, Clement’s inappropriate association has set this term in history and in many circles it remains intact.

⁷See particularly James Garlow, *Partners in Ministry: Laity and Pastors Working Together*. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1981).

⁸See especially Harold Lindsell's two books *The Battle for the Bible* and *The Bible in the Balance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976 and 1979) which brought this matter to a head.

Cf. the most recent controversy over Robert Gundry's redactional commentary on Matthew in *JETS* Vol. 26, No. 1, March 1983 which is devoted entirely to this controversy.

⁹See for instance Rex A. Koivisto's analysis of Clark Pinnock's position on Scripture and Pinnock's response in *JETS*, June 1981, pp. 139-155.

Cf. the position of ICBI in their latest work *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible*. (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1984); *Biblical Errancy: An Analysis of its Philosophical Roots*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981); James M. Boice, ed. *The Foundation of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), with James Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible*, (Westminster, 1981); Paul Achtemeier *The Inspiration of Scripture*, (Westminster, 1979); R.E. Brown, *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* Paulist, 1981); J.B. Rogers and D.K. McKim, ed. *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (Harper & Row, 1979) for the opposing viewpoints, Consider then the position of the centrist C.F.H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* vol. 4. (Waco: Word, 1979)

¹⁰Marshall C. Grigsby, "The Black Religious Experience and Theological Education — 1970-1976: A Six-Year Assessment" *Theological Education* 13 (Winter, 1977): 83 feels that more needs to be done to take serious account of the black context and experience.

Andrew White, "The Role of the Black Church in the Liberation Struggle." *Spectrum* 47 (July, 1971), p. 10 is specific in what that context and experience consists of when he says "the experience is one of blunt rejection, economic deprivation, social isolation; being excluded from, omitted from, exploited, by-passed, suppressed, scorned, brutally beaten, shot down, lynched and mistreated in a thousand different ways solely because one is Black."

I hasten to add that the Black pastor has not been excluded from this type of treatment, in fact he even finds it in the seminary and amongst his white counterparts. His burden is not to be overcome by it so that he might be able to help his people to overcome it without losing hope, becoming embittered or responding in a like manner.

¹¹Unfortunately, the Black church is generally behind in the "shared ministry" concept because of the unique role played by the Black pastor in the community and church that is a part of our tradition created more or less by this racist society. This must change, for younger generations are no longer willing to accept the leadership styles in the Black church that their parents knew.

Emmanuel L. McCall. "Theological Education in the Black Church." *Review and Expositor* 75 (Summer, 1978):418 a Southern Baptist is insightful when he states that "it is necessary to help black pastors understand the validity of a shared ministry with the laity. For some men this will be extremely traumatic since the prevalent role model is the minister who is 'all in all' to his church and community."

¹²For a brief synopsis of how the major denominations have approached blacks regarding Christian education see Grant S. Shockley, "Christian Education and the Black Church: A Contextual Approach." *The Journal of the I.T.C.* 2 (Spring, 1975):75-88. Cf. Alain Rogers, "The African Methodist

Episcopal Church: A Study in Black Nationalism." *The Black Church* 1, No. 1 (1972):17-43 for an A.M.E. biographical account of how blacks were actually forced out of the white church into a separatist church of their own.

¹³Cf. Gayraud S. Wilmore, "Tension Points in Black Church Studies." *Christian Century* 96 (April 11, 1979): 411-413 who as one of our most revered Black theologians and pioneers in this area of Black Studies programs and techniques takes a different approach than mine.

¹⁴Ibid, p. 413. Wilmore says "it is my contention that any white seminary graduate who has not had some exposure to the history, theology and praxis of black religions in America . . . is not prepared for ministry in the kind of world we must live in today."

Without question Professor Wilmore's conclusion must receive its fair hearing, but my concern is more with the method or the perception of the techniques used to accomplish this task. It is here where Wilmore and I disagree.

¹⁵Massey, p. 15 says "no imported system of theology has been relevant to the Black man's life in America."

White, p. 18 adds that even our denominational labels are hand-me-downs. "Protestant denominations among Black people are known as Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Congregational, etc., but none called Black or Negro."

¹⁶C. Eric Lincoln, "The Black Church in the American Society: A New Responsibility?" *The Journal of the I.T.C.* 6 (Spring, 1979):93 is most insightful when he says "perhaps it was not incidental that when God raised up a man to lead America through the racial crisis that had troubled us for more than a century, He did not turn to the wealth and power, the tradition and experience, the prestige and the glory of the establishment churches in America. *They had their chance, and they had defaulted* (my emphasis). But God raised up a leader from the Black Church. Perhaps God was trying to say something to America in general, and the Black Church in particular. Is anybody listening?"

¹⁷James A. Sanders, *God Has A Story Too*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979) in his prophetic/constitutive hermeneutic paradigm would ask white pastors when was the last time they "afflicted the comfortable" of their congregation on the racial issue. It is this type of preaching that makes the word come alive and relevant to our times. It further answers the charge by liberals that conservatives are a group of self-appointed guardians of a word no longer relevant to our times.

¹⁸See for example Mark 7:1-13 where Jesus condemned the Pharisees for invoking the claim of Corban (transliteration of a Hebrew word meaning a gift, particularly to God) to escape their responsibility of supporting their parents.

¹⁹It is this type of stalemate with accrediting associations that have caused many seminaries to reject the accreditation of certain associations.

²⁰Wilmore, p. 413 says that "what distresses me is the silence on this subject in most places. Black church studies is doing well enough where it exists. The problem is that in too many of the so-called leading theological schools in the U.S. it simply doesn't exist."

²¹Bishop John Hurst Adams "Education Toward the Entire Church." *Theologian Education* 15 (Spring, 1979): 113 says that "the persons serving the church as productive ministers who have not been, could not be, or

will not be able to secure a graduate professional theological education need training, credentials, and recognition of their ministry consistent with their service."

But even here we must ask if there is not some type of joint responsibility incumbent upon our theological seminaries and whether that responsibility is denominationally or culturally bound? See William H. Myers, "Towards a Whole Ecclesiology: A Theological/Empirical/Practical Project on Laity Training." Doctor of Ministry Dissertation, Ashland Theological Seminary, 1984 where I have attempted to address this issue and offered a variety of approaches and recommendations as to how this might be accomplished.

Further, I refer all seminaries to the Lilly Project as one superb paradigm in black-white dialogic education. This was a pioneer project under the direction of Professor Gayraud Wilmore of Colgate Rochester. It is documented as "Black Pastors/White Professors: An Experiment in Dialogic Education." *Theological Education* 16, Special Issue 1, Winter 1980.

²²Harold Hunt, Rational Dialogue: A Challenge to Religious Education." *Religious Education* 76 (May-June, 1981):286 says that antialogics are the result when one's life experience is rejected.

²³The interested reader can obtain a more comprehensive literature, resource, paradigm bibliography on either the "black-white experience dichotomy" or the "laity-clergy experience movement" for a nominal fee by contacting Ashland Theological Seminary and referring to my work.