

A JUDE 3 PROJECT CURRICULUM

THROUGH EYES OF COLOR

A CONTEXTUALIZED GUIDE TO HELP YOU KNOW
WHAT YOU BELIEVE AND WHY.



JUDE 3 PROJECT

Chapter Four

CONTRIBUTIONS OF BLACK CHURCHES

I. Is “The Black Church” Dead?

On April 26, 2010 at 5:12 a.m., Dr. Eddie Glaude, Jr., the professor of religion and chair of the center for African American Studies at Princeton University, pronounced the Black Church dead.³²

Do you agree with Glaude’s pronouncement? Why or why not?

Glaude said the Black Church was dead for four reasons:

1. It has allowed its conservatism to prevent it from being on the forefront of today’s political issues.
2. It presumes its ongoing relevance because of its past good works and reputation.

³². Eddie Glaude, The Black Church is Dead, Retrieved May 30, 2019 from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-black-church-is-dead_b_473815?guccounter=1.

3. It's no longer the center of black life as a moral and social compass.
4. It has lost its prophetic voice on the national stage.

ARE BLACK CHURCHES' GLORY DAYS BEHIND US? DO BLACK CHURCHES HAVE ANYTHING LEFT TO OFFER?

In this chapter, we will look at the past and present contributions of black churches while also considering its future.

II. The Past Contributions of Black Churches

When asked “Why the Black Church?” concerning his work with The Black Church Food Security Network, Rev. Dr. Heber Brown responded,

When you look at the Black Church as an institution, it has no match and no equal as it pertains to institutions that have brought tangible resources to the black community. For more than 300 years, black churches have been providing support in the way of mutual aid, legislative advocacy, training ground, professional development . . . [more] than any other of the wonderful organizations that work on behalf of or in the midst of the black community. The Black Church has no equal and no rival in the way of producing concrete and material supports...it has created lasting results for more than three centuries.³³

Did you that know many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were founded by black churches and denominations? Howard University was founded in 1866 by a band of African-American missionaries to provide theological education to African-American pastors and preachers.³⁴ In 1867, Morehouse was founded in the basement of Springfield Baptist Church in Augusta, GA.³⁵ The list goes on:

33. Heber Brown, “Food Justice” [Audio podcast]. Retrieved from <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/food-justice-special-guest-dr-heber-brown/id978012810?i=1000408246683> Jude 3 Project (April 2018).

34. Erica Taylor, Little Known Black History Fact: Howard University, Retrieved May 30, 2019 from <https://blackamericaweb.com/2013/12/18/little-known-black-history-fact-howard-university/>

35. Morehouse Legacy, Retrieved May 30, 2019 from <https://www.morehouse.edu/about/legacy.html>

North Carolina Central University in Durham, NC, Oakwood University in Huntsville, AL, Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans, LA.

When African-Americans had little to no access to financial resources due to slavery and discrimination, black churches pulled their resources together to ensure each person had what they needed for life and upward mobility. In 1787, during slavery, two local pastors named Richard Allen and Absalom Jones founded the Free African Society (FAS). The society's main goal was to provide aid to newly freed blacks so that they could gather strength and develop leaders in the community.³⁶ And get this—the FAS was funded by benevolence offerings and donations from other black people trying to foster stability and upward mobility in their own lives. Imagine the relief and encouragement the FAS provided to newly freed slaves who owned nothing and likely found it difficult to find jobs because white folks preferred free labor over paying for it.

Black churches also gave birth to several credit unions to provide housing and educational loans to African-Americans during the Jim Crow era. In his podcast interview, Dr. Marvin L. McMickle shared that Antioch Baptist Church founded its own credit union in 1945 as a means to provide loans to African-American soldiers who couldn't get conventional mortgages from any other banks in Cleveland, OH.³⁷ These men fought in World War II for the freedom of every yellow, red, black and white American, but they couldn't get a loan in the country for which they had risked their life. Several other black churches around the country organized credit unions to ensure black people were treated with dignity and respect.

We could go on and on about the past contributions of black churches. Have you heard of the Civil Rights Movement? Are you familiar with march at Selma? Are you aware the NAACP conducted most of their business in the pews of black churches? Do you know the where black people in the time of slavery and Jim Crow found refuge in times of despair and trouble? Are you familiar with the songs that they sung? Much of our current freedom is indebted to black churches.

36. The Free African Society, Retrieved May 30, 2019 from <https://hsp.org/history-online/exhibits/richard-allen-apostle-of-freedom/the-free-african-society>

37. Marvin McMickle, “Contributions of the Black Church” [Youtube Video] Retrieved May 31, 2019 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jSe1o4GEcA>

Black churches brought about lasting change because of the Spirit-filled men and women who comprised it. In *An Encyclopedia of African American Christian Heritage*, Dr. McMickle records stories of how these ordinary men and women lived out their faith in an extraordinary God. His book is not only a gift to black churches, but to the church as a whole, as it chronicles a part of church history that is often ignored or overlooked. Here are a few of the Jude 3 Project's favorites from his book, along with a few from other sources:

Richard Allen (1760–1831) is an impressive man. In 1786, Allen purchased his freedom along with that of his wife and children through a process called gradual manumission. One year later, Allen co-founded the Free African Society for the economic and leadership development of recently freed slaves (mentioned above). He was a congregant at St. George Methodist Church in Philadelphia, PA, where his role was to preach to black congregants. However, after he and other black worshippers were removed from a prayer meeting for praying in the “white only” section, they left. This episode of discrimination led to his founding of Bethel Church and African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church—the first black denomination in America. And—don’t miss this—it was founded during slavery! Allen was not only a devoted clergyman but also a savvy businessman. “After purchasing his freedom and that of his wife, he owned and operated several businesses in Philadelphia; his enterprises included a blacksmith shop, shoemaking, and chimney sweeping. Upon his death, he left his family an estate valued at \$80,000.”³⁸

Charles Octavius Boothe (1845–1924) is a true gift to black churches. Before there was the Civil Rights Movement, there was Charles Octavius Boothe at the helm of the Racial Uplift. Before there was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at Dexter Avenue Baptist church (now King’s Memorial Baptist Church), there was its founder Charles Octavius Boothe. Through the Racial Uplift, Boothe “worked to improve

38. Marvin McMickle, *The Encyclopedia of African American Christian Heritage*, (King of Prussia, PA: Judson Press 2002), 3.

the spiritual, social, and intellectual well-being of African-Americans in a society that denied their humanity before God and its Constitution.”³⁹ In 1890, thirty-five years after the Emancipation Proclamation, Boothe wrote and published a systematic theology called *A Plain Theology for Plain People*. Boothe penned this resource out of a desire to equip the saints for the work of ministry so that each of them would reach maturity in Christ despite their lack of formal education. In his mind, it was their birthright to have access to a deep and vibrant understanding of the triune God. He writes, “The private members of churches who have but little time for books, but have great need for the truths that teach, should find the truth suited to their time, their understanding, and their wants. Indeed, our hope lies in the religious education of the whole people.”⁴⁰

James Cone (1940–2018) is likely one of the most controversial theologians of the twentieth century. However, he is beloved and revered by many because he called for white theologians, professors, and pastors to address the sufferings of black folks in their teaching and theology. After receiving his Ph.D. in systematic theology from Northwestern, Cone went on to teach at Philander Smith (HBCU), Adrian College, and Union Theological Seminary. “At Union he laid out the arguments and created much of the bibliography for black theology, beginning with [his books] *Black Theology and Black Power*, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, and *God of the Oppressed*.”⁴¹ His writings and outcry for the liberation of black folks earned him the title “father of liberation theology.” Cone’s work has been used by many other minority groups to develop a theology that addresses their suffering while also calling for their liberation.

Jarena Lee (1783–1855) is the first black woman to be recognized as a preacher. After several years of wrestling with her flesh and depression, she came to faith in Jesus Christ under the preaching of Richard Allen. In 1807, Lee “heard the voice of God commissioning her to preach.”⁴² Lee shared her call to preach with Allen but was turned away because there wasn’t anything in the AME’s bylaws that would allow her to preach. Lee responded to this technicality with, “O how careful ought we to be, lest through our bylaws of church government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life. For [how] unseemingly . . . [is it] for a woman to

39. Charles Octavius Boothe, *A Plain Theology for a Plain People*, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press), viii.

40. *Ibid.*, 3.

41. McMickle, 95.

42. Teisha Wilson, Jarena Lee, Retrieved May 31, 2019 from <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/lee-jarena-1783/>

preach, seeing the Savior died for the woman as well as the man?"⁴³ It wouldn't be until thirteen years later that Lee would be allowed to preach. But once one door was open for her, God opened several more. Lee was the first African American woman to publicly preach to "racially mixed Methodists, Presbyterian, Baptist, and Wesleyan audiences across the Mid-Atlantic states, lower Canada, Cincinnati, Detroit, and New England."⁴⁴ Lee paved the way for women in ministry in the AME church and the church at large, which is why *Christianity Today* named her a "trailblazer for women in ministry."

Rebecca Protten (1718-1780) is exalted by many scholars as the "mother of modern missions."⁴⁵ Upon receiving her freedom from her slave owners at the age of twelve, Protten resolved to use her freedom as a means to preach what she called "the liberating gospel of grace" to those who remained enslaved. As a teenager she faithfully entered into slave quarters located in the plantations of St. Thomas to proclaim the gospel of salvation to domestic servants, cane boilers, weavers, and cotton pickers whose bodies and spirits were stripped every day by slavery.⁴⁶ She was a force. Hundreds—possibly even thousands—came to faith through her missionary efforts.⁴⁷ In the book *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World*, Dr. Jon F. Sensbach reports that her ministry in the Caribbean became "one of the great social and religious movements of modern history, [as] black women and men began to blend Christianity with the religions they had brought with them from Africa, creating a faith to fortify themselves against slavery."⁴⁸

J. Deotis Roberts (1927 -) is a giant in the field of theology. Roberts envisions a liberation of black people that also brings about reconciliation. As a black man born in contentious North Carolina who has earned a bachelor of arts degree from Johnson C. Smith University (HBCU), a bachelors of divinity from Shaw University (HBCU), a doctor of philosophy degree from Edinburgh University in Scotland, and

43. McMickle, 71.

44. Eric Washington, Jarena Lee, Retrieved May 31, 2019 from <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/pastorsandpreachers/jarena-lee.html>

45. Retrieved May 31, 2019 from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rebecca_Protten

46. Jon F. Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 4.

47. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/meet-mother-of-modern-missions/> Retrieved May 31, 2019'

48. Sensbach, 5.

who has served as a professor at HBCUs like Howard University and predominately white institutions like Duke University, Roberts deeply yearns for reconciliation among all his brothers and sisters. He rubs shoulders with all kinds of people and desires for them all to live as though God had indeed torn down the dividing wall of hostility in Christ (Ephesians 2:14) His book, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, provides a biblical pathway for how God calls Christians are to engage in issues of systemic racism, justice, and reconciliation.

Which one of these stories stood out to you the most? What inspired you? How have these men and women encouraged you in your faith?

Which one of these black church leaders would you like to study further? If you are using this resource in a group, consider splitting up this list of leaders up among your group and doing more research on them. Plan to share your findings with one another the next time you meet.

Please do not miss that for each of these men and women it was their deep abiding faith in Jesus Christ that compelled them to live generously, sacrificially, and intentionally for the sake of others.

Richard Allen's and the Free African Society's acceptance of Acts 2:43-47 as the model for the church compelled them to generously give and share everything they had with one another. It was Rebecca Protten's belief that Christ "died for everyone so that those who received new life would no longer live for themselves" that compelled her to live sacrificially for the spiritual and bodily freedom of others (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). It was Charles Octavis Boothe's, Dr. James Cone's, and Dr. J. Deotis Roberts' conviction that every man and woman was created in the image of Christ that compelled them to intentionally labor for the theological education and

liberation of others. Before these men and women were activists, they were followers of Jesus Christ.

It was their belief in a God whose justice would soon shine like the noonday sun that fueled their activism (Psalms 37:6).

III. The Present Contributions of Black Churches

Dr. Glaude wasn't lying when he suggested that black churches have a past that would be difficult to recreate. Though we understand his sentiments concerning the vitality of black churches and would agree with him on some points, we at the Jude 3 Project disagree that "the Black Church" is dead for the following reasons:

1. In his podcast interview, Dr. McMickle clarifies that Glaude pronounced the church dead out of a belief that "the Black Church as the central institution in the lives of black communities [is] coming to an end." Dr. McMickle wisely points out that this has less to do with the Black Church's vitality and more to do with the secularization of America. In 2009, the Barna Group, a research group that tracks spiritual and cultural trends in America, reported that only 9% of Americans had a biblical worldview. If that number doesn't shock you, maybe you would be surprised to know that this means only one out of every five of those who profess to be Christians have a biblical worldview. People are no longer looking to the church as their moral or social compass. However, as long as God's Spirit fills His church, she is alive and poised to do the work God has commissioned her to do (Act 1:8)! To pronounce her dead is a theological fallacy and irresponsible, even if you are simply speaking to the loss of her prophetic voice in the political sphere.⁴⁹
2. Through much of our work at the Jude 3 Project, we have encountered a host of scholars, churches, and stories that testify to the vitality of black churches. In our episode, The Black Church and Economic Development, Bishop Vaughn McLaughlin shares the work that his church, Potter's House International Ministries, is doing for the social, educational, economical, and spiritual well-being of the people of Jacksonville, FL.⁵⁰ They have given birth to a fully accredit-

ed institution of academia that currently has over 600 students enrolled from grades K-4 to twelfth grade. Following in the footsteps of black church forefathers, they have started a federal credit union to provide the marginalized with loans for housing and financial upward mobility. They also have opened up a whole mall where they help many small businesses in their community get off to a good start by allowing them to use space in the mall rent free. This is a church that is making itself central to the life of its community. And it's not the only one! There are black churches all over the country doing this kind of work. But these are not the churches that receive media coverage. These are not the churches whose content floods our Instagram and Twitter feeds. We must be careful not to allow that which is viral to shape our understanding of reality. Just because something is viral, doesn't mean it's valid.⁵¹

3. Additionally, many of our podcast guests are standing on the frontlines of bringing spiritual renewal, economic empowerment, and social flourishing to black communities around the country. There's Dr. Heber Brown and his work to ensure marginalized communities have access to quality food. There's Pastor Jerome Gay and his diligence to expose the lies of black cults such as Hebrew Israelites and Pan-Africanism. There's Michelle Higgins, Dr. Christina Edmundson, and Ekemini Uwan, who with a balance of theological depth, cultural relevance, and sass on their podcast, Truth's Table, speak up against issues of injustice and racism as a way to empower women (and men) to live as people who are truly free. There's Dr. Vince Bantu and his impeccable historical research to ensure that black people know the truth about Christianity and its African origins. And there's Dr. Tiffany Gill and her work to dismantle the lie that Christianity is a white man's religion through a brilliant presentation of African-American history.

Black churches are not dead! These churches are alive, and God has gifted them with an arsenal of leaders to continue to carry their influence forward for His glory.

IV. The Future Contributions of Black Churches

Black churches have brought about lasting change because of the men and women who comprised it and their faith in the God of the Bible. For our churches to continue

49. Eric Mason, Woke Church, Retrieved June 10, 2019 from <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/woke-church-special-guest-dr-eric-mason/id978012810?i=1000422938068>.

50. Vaughn McCaughlin, "The Black Church and Economic Development" [Audio Podcast]. Retrieved from <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/black-church-economic-empowerment-special-guest-bishop/id978012810?i=1000382079366> Jude 3 Podcast (March 2017).

51. [thejude3project]. (2019, May 28). You can't believe everything you read online [Instagram photograph]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/ByAm1wGFhuZ>.

bringing about lasting change, it will require men and women like you to grab ahold of the truths of the Bible in a way that propels God's vision for the world and His people forward. In his podcast interview, Dr. Mika Edmondson gives a profound answer to the question, "How should people and churches engage with issues of injustice?"

I would say first and foremost to ask the Lord to help you understand what the gospel has to do with social justice and the pursuit of justice in the world, because if a Christian approaches these things outside of their faith or as an aside to the faith, then they won't really have the fortitude and the faith and the hope to continue in this work. If you don't understand that this is something that Christ has called us to and that Christ gives us the resources to pursue it, then you'll never truly sacrifice for it. You'll only be in it so far as it benefits you personally, and you won't really give yourself fully to it. So I would say Christians got to dig into the scriptures and into resources that help illuminate what the scriptures . . . have to say to issues of social injustice.

It was Scripture that fortified the efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr., Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and the host of other people mentioned in this chapter. It was their faith in the God of the scriptures that gave black churches their life. And it will be the same scriptures that awaken our generation and ensure the vitality of black churches in the future.

How does the gospel shape your understanding of social justice?

What passages of Scripture compel you to confront instances of racism and injustice? What passages of Scripture give you hope in the face of these challenges?

Brothers and sisters, the question isn't "Is the Black Church dead?" The question is, "Will God's people continue to rise up to proclaim, live out, and call the world

around them to live out the truths of God's Word?" For us to contend for the faith in the face of secularism and the rise of black cults, we have to know what we believe and why we believe it. And this isn't just so we can win a debate or be classified as "woke." This is so we will persevere in our pursuit of bringing God's Kingdom down to earth as it is in heaven. We've got to be informed and inspired by God's vision for the world.

What are some practical ways you can grow in your knowledge of God's Word?

What is one thing in the African American community that burdens you? What passages of Scripture speak to that need?

How has God uniquely gifted you to be a blessing to your community?

How is your church currently being a blessing to your community? What other needs might your church be in a position to meet?

V. Tools for Going Deeper

- Charles Octavius Booth, *A Plain Theology for a Plain People*, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press).
- James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986).
- Marvin McMickle, *The Encyclopedia of African American Christian Heritage*, (King of Prussia, PA: Judson Press 2002).
- J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*, (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1971).
- Jon F. Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).