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The Bourgeoisie Black Church: An Analysis of the American Black Church's Aspirations and Imagination

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Introduction

Black Excellence

In this thesis, I argue that the definition of liberation and striving for Black excellence as exemplified and propagated by the Black church, at its best and most aspirational, has almost nothing to do with being free from oppression, as a whole. Rather, it has more to do with the few Black individuals ascending into the socio-economic middle and upper class of society under the gaze and approval of white supremacy. Most black leaders follow Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s line of interpretation in his work *The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song,* to argue that our efforts to speak truth to power and call out white supremacy have progressed the Black community toward freedom. I submit on the contrary that the Black church has done the opposite in many ways. This thesis is less about analyzing the current arrangement of the Black church or Black people in today's time and more about the origins of the Black church and when we acquiesced to falling in line with the American Project, its goals, and aspirations that brought us to where we are. I focus on the way in which we deem "success" in good Christian living in the American Black church and inquire whether it is measured through the eyes of the white gaze imbued in the American dream.

To provide some biographical context, I want to state clearly that I am a product of the Black church. It is my spiritual home that helped me financially, emotionally, and intellectually in many ways. In fact, I love the Black church. I love the sound of a Hammond B3 organ. I love the hugs from the Mothers of the church. I love the Sunday Best suits that the Deacons wear. I love how universal our language is and how, across all denominations,

if someone has a microphone and says, “When I think of the goodness of Jesus and all that He has done for me,” a Black congregation will respond accordingly. I find comfort, life, joy, and relief when I see a church fan with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on it.

Growing up in the Black church named after Dr. King, I belong to the Prophetic strain in the Black church: the church that believes in speaking truth to power, calling out white supremacy in all its forms, and highlighting our “Black Excellence”. While these things are not exclusive or particular to the Black church, they are things that we are known for and have excelled in for a long time. This thesis focuses on the last part of those three characteristics I mentioned, in the vein of Black excellence, as I and many others believed that we were and are part of a group of people that had all the correct answers and solutions on how to liberate Black people in America. A general definition of Black Excellence is “a high level of achievement, success, or ability demonstrated by an individual Black person or by Black people in general.”[1] Taken at face value, this definition is a noble thing, but the examples of who they believe fits this category are anomalies likes legendary tennis players and overachieving children who become published authors by the 6th grade. This bourgeoise focused definition is heavily used in Black culture that is aligned with middle- and upper-class aspirations that are available to a select few and not available to all.

Because I grew up this community with a bourgeoise posture that harmed and helped me, I feel similar to Robert P. Jones in his work, *White Too Long: The Legacy of*

[1]“Black Excellence,” Dictionary.com, January 28, 2022, https://www.dictionary.com/e/historical-current-events/black-excellence/.

White Supremacy in American Christianity. Jones was born and raised in the South, coming through the Southern Baptist denomination in the 1970s, and inculcated into the white supremacist leanings that he now realized caused so much harm. This book analyzes the denomination and culture that raised him. His book lays out the theological and cultural foundations for white evangelicalism since reconstruction, but he also does not shy away from describing his complicity in it. He talks about the community that white evangelicalism gave him and how he profited from it and has a powerful reflection from it that I think is worth quoting at length. He says,

> I think the fact that white churches produced such a strong sense of safety and security for those of us who were inside the institution is why it is so hard for white Christians to see the harm it did to those who were outside of it, particularly African Americans, and the other kinds of damage it did to us, numbing our own moral sensibilities and limiting our religious development. The problem was not that the community functioned to enhance the lives of those within it; all good communities do that. Rather, the problem was that it had developed in such a way that its main goal was protecting and improving white Christian's lives within an unjust social status quo, which is to say, a context of extreme racial inequality and injustice.[2]

If you replace the word "white Christians" with "Black middle-class Christians" and the term racial inequality with socio-economic inequality, that is my story. The Black middle-class church is a safe haven, a place of comfort and love for me. As stated earlier, it has helped me in a very holistic way. I would not be here without the support of those in that community. As good as it has been for me and those of my socio-economic status, it has been as repressive at worst and anemic at best to the ills of poor and working-class Black people.

[2] Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2021), 75.

I feel similar to James Baldwin's words in his work, *Notes of a Native Son,* where he says, "I love America more than any other country in the world and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually."[3] Because I love the Black people and the Black church specifically, I must point out our flaws in order for us to get back to the liberating work of Christ.

This liberating work of Christ affects the whole group of people, not just a handful of hand-picked few who were able to succeed when the majority of us lived in squalor. This liberating work gets at the issue's root, not just the surface. It is the counterculture world that the Gospel of Matthew talks about in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and the Gospel of Luke in the Sermon on the Plain. This counter-cultural Kingdom is where the last are first and the first are last, where the meek inherit the earth and not the wealthiest, and the high places are made low and low places are made high. That is Christ's liberating work that I feel the Black church is missing, where *all* Black people are made whole. A more faithful Black church is one that follows Christ's example of highlighting the poor, depleted, and disparaged instead of highlighting the wealthy, well-connected, and well-fed.

Middle Class Black Thought and Imagination

The liberating work of Christ that frees all people is antithetical to the middle-class Black thought, imagination, and aspiration. This bourgeoisie way of seeing the world made me and many others raised in the Black church to believe that if we had enough democrats

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[3] Baldwin, James. *Notes of a Native Son*. Ashland, OR: Blackstone Audio, Inc, 2015.

in Washington D.C., Black people as CEOs of Fortune 500 companies and in positions of power, then we could be the nation that Dr. King talked about in his famous dream speech. At the same time, we could individually have our pieces of the American pie. I was taught that if we walked, talked, and acted a certain way, Black people – as a whole- could make it. I was taught we could make it with enough financial resources, social capital, and the right attitude. I believed it was God's will to attend the right church, college, and fraternity, gain the right connections, and live in the right neighborhood. This way of thinking and being is the type of excellence that God wants for all people, specifically Black people, in order to be liberated from their lower status in society.

As an example, Keri Day's *Azusa Reimagined: A Radical Vision of Religious and Democratic Belonging* talks about the beginnings of the Pentecostal tradition that raised her. The 1906 famous revival on Azusa Street in Los Angeles, CA, helped further the Pentecostal movement, which was originally a counter-cultural force because of its racial, gender, and socio-economic integrated practices. Day contrasts this new way of being to the elite Black churches when she says, "For many (B)lack Azusa members, these elite (B)lack churches sought to achieve white respectability by embracing dominant white cultural values of American society, which included a preoccupation with the appearance of economic wealth."[4] Day talks about William Seymour, the Black preacher who initiated the Azusa street revival, and lays out his critique of the Black churches he was a part of and/or witnessed. These churches either had or were aspiring to have pipe organs, large

[4] Keri Day, *Azusa Reimagined: A Radical Vision of Religious and Democratic Belonging* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022), 67

buildings, and moneyed members who had jobs with or around white people that afforded them expensive clothes and jewelry.[5] She summarizes his words by saying, "Seymour is directly critiquing historic (B)lack congregations that mistook their wealth, money, and ability to participate in consumerist capitalist culture with divine favor and future happiness." In Seymour's effort to grow his congregation, Day says of Seymour that "Money would not be a symbol of Christian fulfillment and progress."[6] Under my estimation and what I will explain with this body of work, that is precisely the ethos of our Black churches today.

As stated earlier, this thesis is about the origins of the Black church and when we acquiesced to falling in line with the American Project and its goals and aspirations that brought us to where we are. I will outline how the Black church started as the invisible institution in the brush harbors of the antebellum South as a counter-insurgent force under white oppression. I will key on the time from reconstruction to Jim Crow and how the Black church was at a crossroads on how to function as we moved from the invisible to the visible institution. Through a series of events, our visible institution aligned with the aspirations of the middle and upper class as opposed to the masses of the poor Black people who sit under the thumb of white oppression.

[5] Day, *Azusa Reimagined*, 68.
[6] Day, *Azusa Reimagined*, 68

Chapter 1: Black Church Beginnings

The origins of the Black church in America started in this truly liberatory way, which is how Albert J. Raboteau explains it in his classic text, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. His work is integral for explaining the origins of the Black church in America, connecting our religious roots back to West Africa and our traditional religions, while cementing religion's importance in the life of Black Americans today. He begins by talking about who the captured and enslaved Africans were and the various religious traditions they carried with them to this "New World."[7] He acknowledges that Islam and Christianity were a part of the West African religions, but "by far the greatest number of those Africans who fell victim to the Atlantic trade came from peoples who held the indigenous and traditional beliefs of their fathers."[8] He talks about the use of religion in creating a nation of enslaved and enslavers and how Christianity was used to keep the status quo of oppression in place during the formative years of America.

One theory that was new to me was the tension that the enslavers had in deciding to convert the enslaved because of the glaring contradictions that came with it. In the 17th century, colonists were either outright against or generally unconcerned with converting the enslaved people, as "economic profitability of his slaves, not their Christianization, held top priority for the colonial planter."[9] The Christian missionaries and evangelists had a zeal for converting the enslaved and did all they could to do so, but these missionaries

[7] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4.
[8] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 7
[9] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 98

were at odds with the enslavers at the time. This New World was under British colonial rule, which stated that if enslaved people were baptized, they should be legally freed by law, which obviously goes against the enslavers economic interest.[10] It was only until 1664 that laws started to do away with these obligations, and "By 1706 at least six colonial legislatures had passed acts denying that baptism altered the condition of a slave 'as to his bondage or freedom.'"[11] In addition to the issue of legality, many enslavers were worried about enslaved people understanding the Gospel and its message of freedom and equality. Raboteau claimed that "the danger beneath the arguments for slave conversion which many masters feared was the egalitarianism implicit in Christianity."[12] This, along with the conversion process being too laborious and taking the enslaved away from their sole duty of providing free labor, were the obstacles with slave conversions.

However, the Missionaries eventually appealed to the enslavers by claiming that enslaved Christians "do better for their Master's profit than formerly, for they are taught to serve out of Christian Love and Duty."[13]As laws passed and missionary propaganda continued to work, enslavers attempted to Christianize their enslaved, but with little success. "It is likely that at the end of the colonial era in 1776, a large proportion – possible a majority- of the slaves in that section were still heathen."[14] Raboteau states:

> During the first century and a half of slavery in the United States, only a small minority of slaves received instruction in the Christian faith. The objections of slaveholder; the unsettled state of religion in the Southern colonies, which held the great majority of the slave population; the paucity of missionaries to catechize slaves; linguistic and cultural barriers between Africans and Europeans; the very

[10] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 98
[11] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 99
[12] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 102
[13] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 103
[14] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 110

> way in which conversion was generally perceived – as catechesis, a time-consuming process of religious instruction – all these factors ensured that Christianity touched most slaves indirectly if at all.[15]

It was not until the first Great Awakening started in 1740 that the majority of enslaved Africans began to convert. These revivalistic efforts worked in the country for many reasons, the first being for the enslaved who were attracted to the emotional and extemporaneous feeling they encountered in this service that resonated with their bodies and spirits from days back in West Africa, even after being away from the land for over a century. The second was the fact that the enslavers, who obviously held the power to allow this to happen, agreed to it because the conversion process was simplified from a Catholic catechism process to an "individualistic emphasis of revivalism, with its intense concentration on inward conversion … stressing the conversion experience instead of the process of religious instruction (which) made Christianity more accessible to illiterate slave and slaveholders alike."[16] Thus, the Christianization of enslaved Black folk had started, with Methodist membership increasing from 1,890 Black members in 1786 to 11,682 by 1790.[17] Baptists had less stringent record keeping, but Raboteau's research estimated that "(B)lack membership increased from about 18,000 in 1793 to about 40,000 in 1813.[18]

As more enslaved and free Black people became Christians, the more the white Christian institution grappled with what that meant for their white congregants and superiority in society. As white Christians followed the Bible and its teachings, they

[15] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 126
[16] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 132
[17] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 131
[18] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 131

grappled with many things, like the intermingling nature that Christian fellowship required of all people to be free and civil in their Christian discourse.[19] Primarily through the Methodist and Baptist congregations, they agreed to have separate white and Black churches, with the Black churches under the supervision of White people. As more Black preachers and teachers of the Gospel came about, the institution of the Black church began to form. Raboteou says, "During the closing decades of the antebellum period the so-called invisible institution of slave Christianity came to maturity."[20] Enslaved Christianity operated in the institution of the white churches as well as in the "secrecy of the quarters or seclusion of the brush arbors ('hush harbors') *where* the slaves made Christianity truly their own."[21] The enslaved created their own language and songs and made meaning out of their subjugated situation in the stories of Israel and Jesus.

As stated above, the ease with which the enslaved Africans were able to convert because of the quick conversion process and less need to be literate, which meant that they could spend more time producing for the enslavers as the free laborers they were instead of going through catechesis*, is the sole reason why our invisible institution was able to come to fruition*. This, in my estimation, is important to note because it was a paradigm of the ways in which whiteness was always shaping Black people's religious experience in America, even as we adopted the colonial religion of evangelical Christianity. Whiteness permeated itself in Black Christianity, even from its inception.

[19] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 181
[20] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 212
[21] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 212

Even with its rotten origins, in and through the state of slavery, the uniqueness and autonomy of the Black church was born. Raboteau states that the Black church was "the one institution which freed blacks were allowed to control, the church was the center of social, economic, education, and political activity. It was also a source of continuity and identity for the (B)lack community."[22] Raboteau does a fantastic job of explaining the origins of the Black church, which gives me the foundation for my research today.

Gayraud S. Wilmore also talks about the foundations of Black religion in America, focusing more on the radical and liberatory efforts of the people in his work, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*. He begins in the antebellum South through the time of the civil rights movement and the people's relationship with radicalism. He says, "Black radicalism, therefore, has been and continues to be a form of protest specific to the (B)lack community in its struggle for freedom and a more humane existence."[23] He intentionally correlates an unfazed commitment to Black struggle and liberation with Black radicalism and defines a religion committed to Black liberation as a Black religion. [24] He does not limit it to Christianity but focuses on Black Christianity's role in radical religion. As all Black people in America are trying to make meaning of life, he is excavating the way religion has played a part in the meaning-making. He states:

> It is the purpose of this book to continue this search for meaning and direction by an analysis of the development of (B)lack religion in America from the period of slavery to the emergence of the new theological currents that (B)lack church member

[22] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 320
[23] Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of Religious History of African Americans* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 198.
[24] Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 161

> brought to the civil rights movements of the 1960's, currents that were further developed in what is called the (B)lack theology movement.[25]

He begins by discussing several of Africa's religions and spiritual practices before enslavement. He talks about African Traditional Religions, Judaism, Islam, and the multiple major visits of Christianity in Africa. Wilmore quotes African Historian Lamin Sanneh, who says, "The second visit of Christianity to Africa, which began with the Portuguese effort in the fifteenth century, 'the era of frustration,' and the third visit a more hospitable reception given to the faith between 1787 and 1893, 'the era of promise.'"[26] According to Wilmore, Christianity found its footing as a major religion in West Africa and Black America around the same time.[27]

Wilmore then talks about the role religion played for enslaved Blacks in America and the syncretic nature of the people. He discusses the invisible institution and the way the enslaved Blacks took the Christianity that they were given and made it their own. He says, "From the beginning these churches developed what whites recognized as a 'Negro style' of devotion and belief."[28] Black people were mixing in ways of being from their West African religions like Voodoo, Hoodoo, medicine men, and conjurers. He says that "an essential ingredient of (B)lack Christianity prior to the Civil War was the creative residuum of the African religions.'[29]

Out of this syncretic behavior of the practice of religion, Black people started to have a different read on the Bible and the theology that comes from it, specifically, the

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[25] Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 24
[26] Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 17
[27] Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 18
[28] Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 27
[29] Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 28

liberatory lens they received from the Bible. As they looked upon their subjugated situation, they saw the Bible as an inspirational tool that gave them the confidence to fight back against their enslavers. He goes into great detail about the various slave insurrections and how they were led by the Christian enslaved people, like the famous Nat Turner rebellion, and how that caused great turmoil amongst the enslaving Christian leaders of the nation. Wilmore talks about two documents that gave language and strategy to the yearning for freedom that many enslaved Black people had at the time, arguing that the papers gave the enslaved more inspiration for insurrection. One was the *Ethiopian Manifesto* by Robert Alexander Young, stating that a "mystical vision in 1829 was that a Black Messiah who would champion the cause of 'the degraded of this earth' was to come."[30] He claims that this theme of a Black Messiah would periodically happen throughout the Black community in the USA, West Indies, and Africa. The other publication was the *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens* of the World by David Walker. Wilmore says that "even more than the Ethiopian Manifesto, Walker's appeal is steeped in biblical language and prophecy."[31] These two documents created the theological foundations for Black radical fervor for the people of their time and beyond, which caused many insurrections and general pushback against the position of the enslaved. He highlights three leaders of Black radicalism and insurrection: Gabriel, the Black Samson and leader of the enslaved insurrection of Richmond, Virginia; Denmark Vesey, leader of the enslaved insurrection in South Carolina, and Nat Turner. These early characters in our story are the foundation of

[30] Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 61
[31] Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 62

the liberating teachings and actions in the Black church today. As we discuss the distorted view of liberation that we find in our churches today, it is important to note our ancestors were already engaging in the work of liberating all Black people of their day.

Wilmore then discusses how Black congregations were founded and survived through the 19th century, including the founding of the first African Christian denomination. As he highlights these churches and the various men who led them, he does not make a sweeping generalization that all Black people and churches were radical. In speaking of one of the founders of the first Black denomination -African Methodist Episcopal church- he says, "Even Richard Allen and other northern church leaders were not radicals in the Turner or Garnet sense of the word."[32] As much as there is a throughline of many Black church leaders fighting to have their own spaces to worship, govern, and lead as they deemed fit, they were not all unabashed in calling for the ultimate freedom from all subjugation of Black people across the world.

[32] Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 121

Chapter 2: The Visible and Bourgeoise Institution

The great sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier, held the Black church to task similarly to Gayraud Wilmore's theory of our deradicalization, with a more pessimistic view of the current and future Black church in America and its liberative efforts for Black people. In his work, *The Negro Church in America,* he describes his interpretation of the Black church's origins in slavery and how it transformed into the "Religion of the New Middle Class."[33] He focuses on the great migration from the rural South to urban cities and how Black people in the early and mid-20th century assimilated into White culture in many aspects, with religion being the main one.

Frazier begins by discussing the ramifications of the voyage across the Atlantic Sea upon Black people and how he believes this New World and the enslavers stripped them of their customs and heritage. He thinks we lost unity and customs, as "Negroes were organized in work gangs, labor lost its traditional African meaning as a cooperative undertaking with communal significance."[34] He does not believe that there is sufficient evidence supporting that there is "any continuity between African religious practices and the Negro church in the United States."[35] He believed that Christianity was the basis for social unity and cohesion for his people, driven by the Christian slaveholders and the society that supported it. Even as Black people were adapting Christianity to their

[33] E. Franklin Frazier and C. Eric Lincoln, *The Negro Church in America. The Black Church since Frazier* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1976), 80.
[34] Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, 11
[35] Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, 13

worldview, Frazier does not believe that the ways we worship, read the Bible, or sing our spirituals were and are of much liberatory value to Black people.[36]

As the invisible institution becomes the visible institution, he discusses the tension of slavery in the various denominations that Blacks either founded or were a part of. As Black folks organized their churches, they grew in size and influence. As stated earlier, enslavement debilitated the social cohesion of Black people, and Christianity filled that void for them, giving the white Christian enslavers the goal and duty of organizing enslaved Black people for their profit; however broken and unorganized it may have been. Frazier then says that "this was all changed when the Negro became free, and it is our purpose here to show how an organized religious life became the chief means by which a structure of organized social life came into existence among the Negro masses."[37] He discusses the social, economic, educational, and political hub that the Black church became during and after Reconstruction, making the Black church incredibly important and influential for Black people. It gave people a safe haven from racism while giving them position and power when the white world refused to offer it to them. However, according to Frazier, "The Negro church could enjoy this freedom so long as it offered no threat to the white man's dominance in both economic and social relations."[38]

A significant revelation in this text is the way in which the great migration affected the religious and social life of Black people, as they transformed from exclusively working in the field with little to no education to having a few white-collar jobs and more access to

[36] Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, 19
[37] Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, 36
[38] Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, 51

education. Black people started to find themselves in positions of authority and trust in their occupations while gaining political agency. They were no longer relegated to the pulpit or the church to have meaning and power.[39] Given this new outlook on life from the occupational and educational changes, the look and feel of the church began to change. Frazier calls it the secularization of the church. He quips, "by secularization we mean that the Negro churches lost their predominantly other-worldly outlook and began to focus attention upon the Negro's condition in this world."[40] They became interested in working with the Nation Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League, and their sermons became more attuned to American politics than ever before. However, this is not true for all Black people. While Black folks of all economic classes attended the same denominations in the north as they did in the south, the content primarily changed only for middle and upper class churches. Poor and working class churches continued to have an on other worldly outlook theology that was more demonstrative in nature.They attended the "storefront" churches that were smaller, more intimate, and had sermons about hell, heaven, and where "much emphasis is placed upon sins of the flesh, especially sexual sins."[41] In both congregations, according to Frazier, most of these churches were aspiring for middle-class life and way of being that caused them to think about getting ahead.[42]

[39] Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, 55
[40] Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, 56
[41] Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, 59
[42] Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, 71

Bourgeoise Living Supplants Liberative Thinking

This new middle class, as Frazier argues, has become the most prominent and important class of Black people to the US power structure, whose ways have defined the majority of the Black church. This class of people put their faith in God to assimilate them into the American life and proximity to whiteness, even if the middle and upper-class white people will not accept them[43]. Frazier views the middle class with disdain as it abandons the lower class and the ways of their people for the opportunity to be close to whiteness. This proximity to whiteness erases the possibility of liberation for all Black people, as I am arguing in this work. The leaders of the church have shepherded the people into believing that middle-class living is close to godliness instead of freedom, autonomy, and agency for all Black people, regardless of their socio-economic status.

Frazier continues his critique of the Black middle class in his seminal work, *Black Bourgeoisie*. It examined the Black middle-class in early 20th America, their aspirations, and their role in stifling Black people's quest for liberation. He was one of the first to bring to light a class analysis of Black people from the Civil War through the 1940s and 50s, illumining how their capitalistic aspirations fed into the division against Black people, specifically poor and uneducated Blacks.

He begins by briefly discussing slavery, the Civil War, and the formulation of class distinctions of white people in the South.[44] After the Civil War, race relations were

[43] Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, 89
[44] E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York, NY: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), 17.

obviously still contentious, with white people who did not own land still having a disdain for Black people while finding themselves on the same financial level as the newly freed Black people. Southern whites used the project of restoring white supremacy as a banner in which all whites could unite, even though, as shown by their votes, whites who owned land had vastly different interests than those who did not. The white power structure used Black people as scapegoats for the problems that poor white people were having when, in reality, whites lack of financial stability created this racial segregation system in the South that we now know as Jim Crow.[45] Frazier says that "In order to justify this program, the demagogues, who were supported by the white propertied classes, engaged for twenty-five years in a campaign to prove that the Negro was subhuman, morally degenerate, and intellectually incapable of being educated."[46] What makes matters even worse is that as this happened in the South, the North eventually agreed to its components. They used the Black leader Booker T. Washington as one of its proponents to support racial segregation as he promoted "industrial education for the Negro (that) was provided by northern capitalist."[47]

Amid these class lines being drawn, formerly enslaved Blacks were migrating to the North around 1915, where "they were restricted in their opportunities for employment in industry and white-collar occupations, (but) did not suffer much discrimination in utilizing public institutions.[48] Frazier talks about the church being the center of their social life, as it

[45] Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, 18
[46] Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, 18
[47] Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, 18
[48] Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, 19

was one of the few institutions they owned, specifically in the rural South. In the cities they were migrating to, "a class structure slowly emerged" based on education and behavior as opposed to occupation and income.[49] The jobs in the northern cities might not have been sharecropping, but they were still menial work of day laborers, maids, and servants at white-owned businesses. According to Frazier, this was the beginning of the class distinctions among Black people. As much as the North failed to offer social equality, meaning they would treat Black people as fully human and on an equal level to whites, the economic opportunities were more abundant. In addition, Blacks could participate in and benefit from some of the privileges of being citizens in America, like free education for their children, voting, and holding office, which gave them the veil of resisting racial discrimination. These words by Frazier are worth quoting in full, as I feel they align well with my study:

> Through their experience with city life, Negroes acquired a certain sophistication towards the world and tended to redefine their problems in America. They did not seek a solution in a narrow program of racial exclusiveness such as the Garvey Movement. Especially during the Depression years some of them joined the Communist Party, which defined the Negro problem as a problem of 'national liberation' from capitalist oppression. The vast majority of Negroes, however, gave up their sentimental allegiance to the Republican Party and supported the Democratic Party and the New Deal Program, which offered concrete economic advantages and a promise of satisfying their aspirations as citizens.[50]

In my opinion, this is where the idea of liberation for *all* Black people was erased, and the concept of liberation for the few who worked hard was cemented in the psyche of the Black church and Black America as a whole. As the Black church and its leaders were

[49] Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, 20
[50] Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, 22

more influenced by those outside the church than in it, it adopted these bourgeoise attitudes and postures that we still hold on to today.

Education of Bourgeoisie Belonging

This bourgeoise attitude is something that is taught to Black folks as they matriculate into higher education and get closer to whiteness, creating a gap between Black people and their culture. Carter G Woodson talks about this in his work, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, as he describes the ways since the Civil War, Black people have been taught to hate who they are and love their oppressors. He discusses the ways that the more educated Black people became, the more they were taught to hate who they were and where they came from, if they were taught about who they were at all. He believed that Black people were indoctrinated into believing that everything good was European and that everything wrong was Black.[51] Woodson explains how this is an ongoing concerted effort by white America to continue the status quo of white supremacy. The famous quote was introduced in this book, where he says, "When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions."[52] This means that if America taught Black people to love everything white and hate everything Black, they would always live, almost happily, under the state of oppression.

He makes a point to discuss "educated" Black people, meaning Black people who have been able to matriculate through the realms of academia, and "when a Negro has finished his education in our (Black) school, then, he has been equipped to begin the life of

[51] Carter Godwin Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (New York, NY: Clearlight, 2012), 5.
[52] Woodson, *The Mis-Education*, 5

an Americanized or Europeanized white man."[53] They learn next to nothing positive about their own people, if they learn anything at all. Woodson says, "In school pupils were made to scoff at the Negro dialect as some peculiar possession of the Negro which they should despise"[54] rather than love. He gives many other examples of the neglect of Black or African studies in primary and secondary education. He states that even when the teacher is Black, they have learned this way of thinking and teaching, so the mis-education continues to go on and the oppression continues.

This creates an inferiority complex that makes the educated Black person mimic White people, however unsuccessful. He does give some grace to the people of his time, stating that "One cannot blame the Negro for not desiring to be reminded of being the sort of creature that the oppressor has represented the Negro to be."[55] Woodson knows that Black people have a great and rich history that has been intentionally kept away from Black people, keeping them on a wheel to their demise.

[53] Woodson, *The Mis-Education*, 10
[54] Woodson, *The Mis-Education*, 20
[55] Woodson, *The Mis-Education*, 151

Chapter 3: We Could Have Been Free

This rich history includes the Black church in America, for better or worse. For one brief moment in reconstruction, we had an opportunity to push for liberation for all Black people, but the white power structure took it away. Since reconstruction, the Black church has been made into a vehicle of repression of liberation and a continuation of the American imperial regime. Gayrod Wilmore discusses this evolution after reconstruction and points directly to Booker T. Washington as the conduit of the newly institutionalized Black accommodationist. He discusses the connection between Black religion and Black nationalism during and shortly after the antebellum South, keying in on several key figures that shaped Black theology and religious action. These key figures presented their ideas of what the Black community needed, all seeing the need for Black autonomy. Bishop Henry McNeal Turner was one of the more prominent figures who was a clergyman in the AME church and involved in federal politics, eventually advocating for emigration back to Africa. Emigration was an idea that gained some traction for him and other figures, but it never materialized due to several factors. Wilmore claimed that after Turner died, the Black church started to become "deradicalized."[56] By that, he means no longer uncompromising in its definition of Christianity and religion as Black, autonomous, and even, at times, violent. As Turner's fame and health started to deteriorate, people like Booker T. Washington came to prominence in the Black community because of his oratory skills and intellect, but Washington did not believe that Black people needed to be in positions of

[56] Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of Religious History of African Americans* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 163.

political leadership to hold any power, he believed in gradual economic progress outside of overt politics. The radicals of the time wanted immediate control and autonomy of their own position in life, whereas Washington accepted this lower position of society and believed that liberation was possible through isolated economic activity within the Black community. Wilmore's take on him and his influence is worth the full quote, as he says:

> Washington's gradualism, while opposed by a few who were not dependent upon his influence for personal advancement, was adopted by most (B)lack preachers not only because they lacked the courage to fight back but because it was consonant with the ethics of the white Christianity by which they were increasingly influenced. The picture of the non-violent, self-effacing, patiently suffering white Jesus held up by the conservative evangelicals and revivalists at the turn of the 20th century became the authoritative image of Christianity for many (B)lack preachers. That image provided irrefutable confirmation, supported by Scripture, of the wisdom and practicality of Washington's position.[57]

The combination of white evangelicalism and Booker T. Washington's message started the decline of the radicalization of the Black church. The combination of a hyper-focus on economic progress as the way to liberation led Black people to believe in the middle and upper class as the path to success, especially as they saw their leaders in the bourgeoise community. In defining the leaders of Black organizations in the early 1920s, he says the "Niagara Movement, the NAACP, and the denominations exhibiting this 'polite, deferential opposition' were not composed of the ragtag, down-and-out (B)lacks who were so submerged economically that they could not mount a more forceful program to improve their situation."[58] The heads of these critical organizations, who were in charge of leading Black people to a better life, were no longer coming from the majority of Black people who

[57] Wilmore, *Black Religion*,168
[58] Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 168

were struggling to live day by day. They were a part of a burgeoning class of people who were given closer proximity to whiteness, which allowed them to live a better life.

Deradicalization Solidified

As Black people entered and lived in the post-reconstruction world and were trying to make their way through, they adopted the middle-class aspirational ideas of what it means to be an American, aka, white. In *Black Bourgeoisie*, E. Franklin Frazier also discusses the impact of Booker T. Washington and his outlook on religion. He quotes Washington in one of his addresses at a chapel service at the Tuskegee Institute, which he founded and still stands today as Tuskegee University, as he makes his case to mix morality and religion with worldly good. Washington says,

> We might as well settle down to the uncompromising fact that our people will grow in proportion as we teach them that the way to have the most of Jesus and in a permanent form is to mix with their religion some land, cotton, and corn, a house with two or three rooms, and a little bank account. With these interwoven with our religion, there will be a foundation for growth upon which we can build for all time.[59]

This type of thinking has permeated the Black church since reconstruction and still rings true today. While it may not be the overt prosperity gospel that was created in the 1950s and was made famous in the 80s at the advent of widespread technology, the overarching theme of Black churches today is that being and aspiring for the middle class is close to godliness. With that aspiration comes complacent liberation that settles on the fact that things are better than what they "used to be," given that the "used to be" was a lower economic status. Generally, Black Christians are aware of prosperity preachers like

[59] E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York, NY: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), 73.

Creflo Dollar and Joel Olsteen~~,~~ who make no qualms about equating financial wealth with God's favor and poverty with sin. While the majority of churches would reject this type of theology, many operate under this mindset that Washington espoused, that **is,** good Christian living means you will reach a certain level of financial security. The issue with this, as I have stated numerous times, is that this standard of living is not available to all and is not aligned with the way of Jesus but the way of capitalism.

We are mis-educated into the ways of the middle class. Carter G. Woodson believes that the Black church is part and parcel of the mis-educated people. He believes that what the "Negro church is, however, has been determined largely by what the white man has taught the race by precept and example."[60] He points out that the few educated preachers learned from the mis-educated theology and divinity schools of their time, making them a part of the indoctrination process as well. He also argues that the denominations are meant to split the Black community into different sects that do not cooperate with each other. He gives multiple examples of preachers going into town with one or two larger churches, the preacher starts his own church and fractures the community even more.[61]

This mis-education was the foundation of where we are in the Black church that has the American, the modern state of Israel[62], and the state flag all flying next to the Christian flag. As I have stated before, tying in the aspirations of the American dream that includes

[60] Carter Godwin Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (New York, NY: Clearlight, 2012), 59.
[61] Woodson, *The Mis-Education*, 54
[62] Angela Y. Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), **25**

expectations of financial security with the following of the way of Jesus, causes the Black church to become anemic to the plight of the poor and working-class Black parishioner and focus on the ideals of the middle class. This type of thinking allows for churches to allow America's interest, like continuing its support of the modern state of Israel, to infiltrate our sacred spaces, who should have the opposite interest. The interests of America are antithetical to the concerns of the widows and orphans of our time. They are concerned with supporting the perception of conspicuous consumption and pledging allegiance to corporations instead of centering the humanity of all people above their profits. Perception is important, as the material benefits of proximity to whiteness for the majority of Black people never come to fruition, but the *perception* of a few Black people making it tell a different story. As Black college students were comparing and imitating their white counterparts, they frequently exaggerated it and maintained a disdain for folks of their same race but a different class. Frazier says, "In fact, in their struggle to attain American middle-class ideals, they gave the impression of being super-Americans."[63] These super-American ideals are what folks aspired to be seen as, without the actual financial and social security that comes with this allegiance to America. In cataloging the changes in higher education from farming to industrial education, he states, "In all the institutions, the canons of respectability were undergoing a radical change. Respectability became less a question of morals and manners and more a matter of the external marks of a high standard of living."[64]

[63] E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York, NY: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), 83.
[64] Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, 81

In America, a country that is built on the disenfranchisement and exploitation of most for the profit of a few, all Black people will not be free. That is the problem with middle class aspirations; it is not for all black people and only for a few. The few that tear the next person down as they make their way to the top. Frazier gave an example of this mythical thinking when he talks about a Negro Pullman porter voting against the best interest of himself and other Black people not in his position, as porters were making a decent living in those times. Frazier describes this porter in particular and how he "owned his home and four shares of stock, valued at about eighty dollars, in a large American corporation. He declared that he was against the policies of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal because they taxed men of property like himself in order to assist lazy working men."[65] As folks like Turner died and Washington came to prominence, the Black church became a bastion for middle class aspirations and thinking like this Pullman porter. The promised land given to Israel started to look like the middle-class land of New York, leaving behind Black people in the cotton fields of the South. In my opinion, real liberation is available to all, not just some. It is not built on the notion of respectability but on allowing people to live their authentic lives without having to abide by standards that were never made by or for them.

As much as the Black church has been home for me and millions of other Black people in this country, it has been an arm of the American imperial machine that rocks us to sleep by giving us the crumbs of the capitalistic pie to fight over while the few at the top enjoy the surplus of our labor. We have been indoctrinated into believing that not only can

[65] Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, 173

we enter into the top 1% of the socio-economic class of people, but it is God's will that we try. I believe in a God of abundance for *all* people, not just a selected few. As we rebuild to start a new, I pray that we consider the origins of the man that we call our savior in Jesus, who was a barefoot Palestinian Jew who everything he owned was borrowed and follow that model of a servant. Woodson talks about this servant of the people, who he believes must be from and live amongst the people, not above and away from them. He says that,

> The servant of the people, unlike the leader, is not on a high horse elevated above the people and trying to carry them to some designated point to which he would like to go for his own advantage. The servant of the people is down among them, living as they live, doing what they do and enjoying what they enjoy. He may be a little better informed than some other members of the group; it may be that he has had some experience that they have not had, but in spite of this advantage he should have more humility than those whom he serves, for we are told that "Whosever is the greatest among you, let him be your servant."[66]

This is the spirit that I pray we move with as we follow our great servant in Jesus Christ.

[66] Carter Godwin Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (New York, NY: Clearlight, 2012), 104.

Conclusion: Tending to the Dry Bones

One of the more popular Biblical stories in the Black church is that of the Valley of the Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37:1-14. Ezekiel was born into the priesthood, as was the custom of the Ancient Near Eastern time in that one had to be the son of priest to qualify to be one. He watched his father live by respecting and obeying the priestly codes and living a certain way his whole life, and Ezekiel was expecting to do the same when God called him out of this priesthood journey and into the journey of the despised prophet. Ezekiel 1:1 says that in his 30th year of life, the year he would have been ordained as priest, God gave him a vision and turned him into a prophet. In this prophetic visionary scene in chapter 37, verse 2 says that God *made* Ezekiel walk among the dry bones, which is antithetical to what priest in training was taught, as the priestly codes order them to stay away from dead bodies as that would make them unclean and unfit for work as a priest. But in order to speak life into the dry bones, which was a euphemism for the exiled people of Israel during Ezekiel's time, he *had* to walk among them in order for them to be liberated.

In the same way, I believe that the Black church must do the same in walking among the dry bones of our community. We must walk and talk with those whom the Black church teaches us to believe will taint us as and make us unfit for duty as middle class citizens of this country, who are the poor and lower class members of our community. We must reject the lies of Black Excellence that claim that we are exceptional only if we reach a certain income level and those that did not are lazy and/or did not work hard enough. We must realize that poor Black folks have been systematically relegated to the lower and working class while others have been systematically propagated into the middle and upper class.

Just like Ezekiel *had* to walk among the very dry bones before he realized how many there were and how dry they actually were, the dryness correlating to the length they had been there and the desperation of their condition, we also have to walk around the dry bones of our community to analyze the conditions that led them to that place. We have to realize how long Black people have been at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder and allow poor folks to tell the Black Church how much closer the bourgeoise middle class folks are to the bottom than whiteness has made them believe.

This is echoing what Woodson said, which is to be amongst the least and left behind in our community. Our analysis of what is good, true, and liberatory needs to come from those who are seen as the worst, dishonest, and enslaved. Keri Day talks about this in *Azusa Reimagined* as she paints a picture of what the Pentecostal church could look like in the future that is not centered on capitalistic values. She leans on religious scholar Karen Bray and borrows her term "grave attending to the unredeemed,"[67] which means to sit with and follow those who are "trapped in the demonic circuits of racial capitalism to cultivate political moodiness."[68] Moodiness is the agitation and unsettling nature that one has to the material conditions that one finds oneself and others in, which inspires the people to change their circumstances by any means necessary. The unredeemed are "those who refuse to 'go with the flow' of late capitalism because capitalist promises reflect relations of cruel optimism … such people reject the redemptive narratives that market capitalism espouses- that one will be saved if one embraces the democratic promises of

[67] Keri Day, *Azusa Reimagined: A Radical Vision of Religious and Democratic Belonging* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022), 155
[68] Day, *Azusa Reimagined*, 152,

capitalism."[69] The unredeemed are the dry bones that need to be listened to instead of castigated.

She paints a picture of a fictitious Black boy from a low-income neighborhood who "hears through all kinds of social and political messaging that he is only as successful as what he can buy, who his friends are, what he owns, and where he lives."[70] Given his socio-economic status, this version of success is unattainable for him, so he becomes "moody" and "participate(s) in an underground economy"[71] in order to be worthy and fit in with society. She says that,

> This young man's actions are often interpreted as defying and breaking the law, that is not an accurate interpretation. His actions reflect his moodiness, grief, and unhappiness within a system that produces and is responsible for this very unhappiness. He is unable to feel his own sense of dignity within a system that measures human worth through material things and financial advancement. What would it mean to explore how these moods are signs of economic inequality and social brokenness within America's supposedly democratic institutions?[72]

These questions need to be asked for the Black church to become a place where hope for all Black people could be gleaned again. Day says, "What would it mean to listen to the moods of the unredeemed? What questions, insights, and breakthroughs might we experience if we wrestled with their pessimism about American democracy and its capitalist promises?"[73] These are the things that we need to tend to, to the unredeemed. In our spaces where we center the voices of those with a Ph.D. in economics or theology, we need to center the voices of those who barely made it out of high school. As Rev. Dr. Martin

[69] Day, *Azusa Reimagined*, 156
[70] Day, *Azusa Reimagined* ,155
[71] Day, *Azusa Reimagined*, 155
[72] Day, *Azusa Reimagined*, 156
[73] Day, *Azusa Reimagined*, 156

Luther King Jr. famously said in his famous sermon, *The Drum Major Instinct*, the "church is the one place where a Ph.D. ought to forget that he's a Ph.D. The church is the one place that the school teacher ought to forget the degree behind her name … And any church that violates the 'whosever will, let him come' doctrine is a dead, cold church, and nothing but a little social club with a thin veneer of religiosity."[74] As I have laid out here in this thesis, the church is precisely that of a social club where those who pay the most have the most say, but we need to refocus on those who have little to give.

To be clear, I am not asking for us to continue to partake in the project of neo-liberal identity politics where one's identity makes them either an infallible epistemological expert on their entire communities situation in which no one can question, or we "pass the mic" to the one who wins the game of intersectional oppression Olympics so their voices can be heard with no material improvement to life of the masses.[75] Olúfémi O. Táíwò, Professor of Philosophy at Georgetown University, talks at length about this in his book *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics(And Everything Else)*. He defines this phenomenon as deference politics, where we center the voices and opinions of those deemed marginalized in the room in order to create a more just outcome for the group as a whole. While that is a good place to start, and what I am in fact suggesting for the Black church to do as a first step is going back to our liberative roots, it is not the end goal. This is an individualized response to a systemic problem, where we can claim victory for a whole identity group when one person from the group succeeds. Táíwò talks about this from his

[74] Martin Luther King, *The Radical King*, ed. Cornell West (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015), 258.
[75] Olúfémi O. Táíwò, *Elite capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2022).

perspective as a Nigerian American who benefited from the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act that allowed immigrants with skilled labor to migrate into America, including his family. He benefited from this and is used as an example of this type of neo-liberal identity politics. He rebukes this kind of thinking when he says, "What no one mentions, of course, is that the 112,000 or so Nigerian Americans with advanced degrees are utterly dwarfed by the 82 million Nigerians who live on less than a dollar a day."[76] The same can be said for the Black church, that boast of how well its members may be doing, in even the largest of churches, because of their faith in God, when in reality the majority of Black Americans are at the bottom of every socio economic ladder since the inception of this country.

What I am suggesting is that we take a constructive approach to rebuilding our church instead of one of deference. Our goal should be to tend to the unredeemed that Day talks of and the dry bones from Ezekiel, and prepare our spaces for them to be there. Táíwò says, "The constructive approach is, however, extremely demanding. It asks us to be planner and designers, to be accountable and responsive to people who aren't yet in the room."[77] What I am suggesting is that we design our buildings, services, and experiences around the material conditions of those who have been materially damaged the most by this racist capitalist state of America, who are not yet in the room. We do this to inspire a cultural shift in which we move away from middle-class aspirations and toward a new way of thinking of being that we have not seen or experienced. This is not an argument for a new

[76] Táíwò, *Elite Capture*, 76
[77] Táíwò, *Elite Capture*, 118

economic system, slogan, or flag to put into one's social media biography section. This is about living like Jesus, who walked among the dry bones and attended to the widow and the orphan first, not the Rabbi and the tax collector. The colonial logic is deep within our psyches, so we have yet to imagine what can be next. But as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 2:9 (KJV), *But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him*.

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