

A THEOLOGY OF PRESENCE: A BLACK PASTOR AND A GREEK ARCHBISHOP

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Introduction

Several months ago, a professor at St. Vladimir's Seminary voiced a concern I had after visiting an Orthodox Church in New Orleans: "Where are the people of color?"¹ And we are certainly not the only ones to ask it. According to Subdeacon Paul Abernathy, many want to know what they can do to bring black people into the church. He responded by encouraging Christians to bring Jesus to the people, "the one thing that hasn't happened in the Orthodox community."² Similar comments,³ scattered throughout Orthodox Christian papers, blogs, and conferences, lead one to conclude that all too often the Church fails in its mission to be catholic, to be incarnational, to be present.⁴

Why do I begin here? Mainly because these problems must be addressed if the Orthodox Church is to speak meaningfully to the surrounding culture. And in order to speak meaningfully,

¹ Fr Moses Berry recalls visiting an Orthodox Church in St. Louis and asking to venerate the icons. Although the church was open, the priest denied the request and told him "he would feel much more comfortable at the Coptic Church." Berry goes on to mention that this same priest, "when asked by an interviewer on television why more people weren't joining the Orthodox Church, answered that the reason lay in obstructive immigration policies!" See D. Oliver Herbel, *Turning to Tradition: Converts and the Making of an American Orthodox Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 93, citing Moses Berry, "An Encounter with a Saint," *Again* 17:2 (1994), 26.

² This talk, given at the Annual Ancient Christianity and African-American Conference (henceforth AAC), can be found online here: http://www.ancientfaith.com/specials/19th_annual_ancient_christianity_and_african_american_conference/session_four1 (accessed December 4, 2016).

³ E.g., Jerome Sanderson, "African Pillars of the Church," in *An Unbroken Circle: Linking Ancient African Christianity to the African-American Experience*, ed. Paisius Altschul (St. Louis, MO: Brotherhood of St. Moses the Black, 1997), 25: "Unfortunately, the belief that Christianity is a white man's religion persists not only among Black Muslims and misinformed black youth, but in the hearts of those in the Church who should be spreading the Good News and seeking out the sheep that are lost." Cf. Catharine Watson, "African-American Encounter with Orthodoxy" (master's thesis, St. Vladimir's Seminary, 2003). My thanks to Dn. Seth Earl for bringing this source to my attention.

⁴ Another criticism emerges if one considers that most of the growth in American Orthodox Churches is due not to evangelizing the lost, but to Protestant conversions. For this point, see Nick Protos, "Understanding the Movement of Evangelicals to Eastern Orthodoxy" (DMin diss., Covenant Theological Seminary, 2008), 84. His conclusion is based on a thorough review of conversions over the past several decades. As such, he is convinced that the Orthodox "need to return to the evangelism of the early church" (ibid).

the church must, before uttering a single word, learn how to listen, all the while keeping in mind that a refusal to hear people is a refusal to hear Christ.

What follows is a selective analysis of two men who listened and responded to the cries of the oppressed. In outward appearance, they were very different: one an African-American Baptist pastor from Atlanta; the other a Greek-Orthodox clergyman from Imbros. Common to both, however, was a commitment to stand and speak out against racial prejudice and other forms of social injustice. Their names: Martin Luther King, Jr. and Archbishop Iakovos. When these men are mentioned in the same breath, attention is often directed to the 1965 cover of LIFE magazine: on the left is the Archbishop in black clerical garb, staff in hand, solemnly standing next to Dr. King, who is holding a memorial wreath in honor of the recently slain minister, James Reeb. Although his participation in the Civil Rights movement brings pride to many Orthodox Christians today, at the time Archbishop Iakovos “received threatening letters from his own people, of his own faith,” some even going so far as to call him a “traitor.”⁵ King, likewise, encountered his fair share of hate mail⁶ and opposition, mostly from outsiders, but sometimes from his own people.

The fact that both men received criticism from the inside raises the question of why some Christians opposed the Civil Rights Movement. In order to address this issue, one must consider King’s understanding of the gospel and how it shaped his vision for social change. Significant attention, therefore, is given to events that spawned the movement, most notably Rosa Park’s refusal to give up her bus seat and subsequent arrest, both of which are covered in detail by

⁵ Michael Varlamos, “His Eminence Archbishop Iakovos & the Civil Rights Movement: Selma, 1965,” Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, <http://www.goarch.org/archdiocese/departments/ecumenical/mlk/iakovos-civilrights> (accessed December 8, 2016). Cf. Maureen Dowd, “A Vibrant Iakovos Marking 24 Years as Archbishop,” *New York Times*, October 29, 1983, <http://www.nytimes.com/1983/10/29/nyregion/a-vibrant-iakovos-marking-24-years-as-archbishop.html> (accessed December 4, 2016).

⁶ See pp. 7–8 below.

King.⁷ Attention is also given to the interpretation and application of the gospel in King's public sermons, specifically those that were collected and delivered before 1965.⁸ Next, I provide a biographical sketch⁹ of Archbishop Iakovos, allowing pertinent details about his life to inform his motivation for responding to various social issues.¹⁰ Ultimately, my goal is to show that these men embraced a theology of presence which, if emulated, will enable Christians to speak meaningfully and creatively to the needs of their context. I end on a practical note: by drawing on Orthodox sources and my own experience, I offer suggestions as to how the church can engage the black community.

Segregation: Impact and Christian Responses

At various points in his childhood, King faced the negative effects of segregation. He remembers his white friends suddenly not being allowed to play with him, and also the time his father, when attempting to purchase shoes, was told to move to the back of the store.¹¹ Racial discrimination impacted not just King and his family, but other blacks, some of whom were

⁷ *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958).

⁸ Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

⁹ Helpful here, but excessive in his praise of Archbishop Iakovos, is George Poulos, *A Breath of God, Portrait of a Prelate: A Biography of Archbishop Iakovos* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1984). Cf. Demetrios J. Constantelos, "The Man We Honor, Archbishop Iakovos," in *Orthodox Theology and Diakonia*, ed. Demetrios Constantelos (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press), 10–19. For the Archbishop's global impact, consult Peter Steinfels, "Greek Orthodox Bid Goodbye to Their Archbishop After 37 Years." *New York Times*, July 1, 1996, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/07/01/nyregion/greek-orthodox-bid-goodbye-to-their-archbishop-after-37-years.html>. Cf. Maureen Dowd's article referenced in n. 5 above.

¹⁰ Here I assume that many non-Orthodox persons today, if they know anything about Archbishop Iakovos at all, are probably more acquainted with his involvement in the Civil Rights movement than with other aspects of his life.

¹¹ King, *Strength to Love*, 4–6.

lynched by the KKK, beaten unjustly by police, and treated unfairly in court.¹² Such atrocities led King “perilously close to resenting all white people.”¹³

Although the situations described above called for action, many black ministers displayed “indifference” when it came to social concerns, sincerely believing they were “not supposed to get mixed up in such earthly, temporal matters... They were to ‘preach the gospel,’ and keep men’s minds centered on ‘the heavenly.’”¹⁴ This view was also common among white ministers, e.g., segregationist Dr. E. Stanely Frazier, who argued that “[t]he job of the minister... is to lead the souls of men to God, not to bring about confusion by getting tangled up in transitory social problems.”¹⁵ For King, such a mindset did not fully encapsulate the Christian message. “The gospel is social as well as personal,” he writes, and every Christian must “seek to rid the earth of social evils.”¹⁶ Thus, two contradicting interpretations of the Christian message existed in the minds of people, race notwithstanding. At the risk of oversimplification, we might call these views, respectively speaking, the *heavenly-gospel* and the *both-and gospel*.

King’s attempt to hold together a *both-and gospel* is amply demonstrated in sermons he preached during and after the bus boycott in 1955-56. Support for his theology included the

¹² In 1958, Jeremiah Reeves, 16, was accused of raping a white woman. After a forced confession, he later retracted his statement, but was still declared guilty. Two appeals were made to the US Supreme Court, which reversed the decision but ultimately allowed the State Supreme court to judge the case. Reeves was executed by electrocution on March 28, 1958, despite denying having slept with the woman at all. About this situation, King observed, “The Reeves case was typical of the unequal justice of Southern Court. In the years that he sat in jail, several white men in Alabama had also been charged with rape; but their accusers were Negro girls. They were seldom arrested; if arrested, they were soon released by Grand Jury; none was ever brought to trial. For good reason the Negroes of the South had learned to fear and mistrust the white man’s justice.” As quoted in King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 17.

¹³ Ibid., 72.

¹⁴ Ibid., 20.

¹⁵ Ibid., 97.

¹⁶ Ibid., 98.

Sermon on the Mount, the parable of the Good Samaritan, and the crucifixion of Christ, all of which contained physical and spiritual implications. There is in his preaching a remarkable balance emphasizing the need for both. When expounding, for instance, on Romans 12.1, he reminds his congregation that in order “to gain the strength to fight vigorously the evils of the world in a humble and loving spirit,” one must first experience “spiritual transformation.”¹⁷ Elsewhere, in a sermon on Rev 21.16, a triangle illustrates man’s need for length (love of self), breadth (love of others) and height (love of God). Using one’s talents and gifts (length) without a concern for others (breadth) is self-centered and the cause of many modern problems. Likewise, if one has length and breadth but not height, humanity becomes god and man lives “without a sky.”¹⁸ The complete life, on the other hand, is displayed only in the triangle of love: when man reaches up to God and then out to man, never letting go of either.

These examples illustrate how King consciously strove to avoid falling prey to extremes. A summary of his position, as well as a critique of those who neglected earthly or heavenly concerns, is contained in the following excerpt:

Any religion that is completely earthbound sells its birthright for a mess of naturalistic pottage. Religion, at its best, deals not only with man’s preliminary concerns but with his inescapable ultimate concern. When religion overlooks this basic fact it is reduced to a mere ethical system in which eternity is absorbed into time and God is relegated to a sort of meaningless figment of the human imagination.

But a religion true to its nature must also be concerned about man’s social conditions...On the one hand it seeks to change the souls of men, and thereby unite them with God; on the other hand it seeks to change the environmental conditions of men so that the soul will have a chance after it is changed. Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion.¹⁹

¹⁷ King, *Strength to Love*, 16.

¹⁸ Ibid., 90. The sermon is entitled “Three Dimensions of a Complete Life.”

¹⁹ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 21.

Although King's rationale for a *both-and gospel* has been clearly articulated, we have not yet demonstrated how his theology was contextualized. How is God's love shown to others? What can be done to address societal evils like poverty and racism? These were questions King faced head on in the 1950s.

The Move to Alabama: Hard Times in the South

After much discussion and prayer, King and his wife, Coretta, concluded that "in spite of the disadvantages and inevitable sacrifices, [their] greatest service could be rendered in [their] native South."²⁰ And so in September of 1954, the couple moved to Montgomery, Alabama, where Martin assumed pastoral leadership of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.

In addition to joining the NAACP, King became involved with the Alabama Council on Human relations, an inter-racial committee seeking "to attain through research and action equal opportunity for all the people of Alabama."²¹ Although both groups shared a common goal—integration—the NAACP emphasized change through legislation, while the Alabama Council focused on change through education. King, in harmony with his *both-and* approach to the gospel, did not see these options representing an either-or choice:

On the contrary I felt that both approaches were necessary. Through education we seek to change attitudes; through legislation and court orders we seek to regulate behavior. Through education we seek to change internal feelings (prejudice, hate, etc.); through legislation and court orders we seek to control the external effects of those feelings. Through education we seek to break down the spiritual barriers to integration; through legislation and court orders we seek to break down the physical barriers to integration. One method is not a substitute for the other, but a meaningful and necessary supplement.²²

²⁰ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²² *Ibid.*, 18–19.

Both here and elsewhere, King argues that a correct understanding of certain topics comes only through embracing a *both-and* perspective. What is man, if he is not both physical and spiritual?²³ What is God, if he is not both tough-minded and tender-hearted?²⁴ What is love, if it is not demonstrated in action?²⁵ In each case, separation leads necessarily to a distorted understanding of essence: what it means to be x, y, or z. And this is necessary to keep in mind, because it shaped King's understanding of the gospel, which in turn informed how he applied it to social issues in the 1950s.

At that time, numerous blacks were experiencing unjust treatment on Montgomery buses. Racial slurs abounded, individuals often being referred to as “niggers,” “black cows,” and “black apes.”²⁶ One woman remembers a Negro being threatened with a pistol for not having correct change. Another tells about the time a bus driver, knowing her husband's leg was caught in the door, refused to stop, dragging him several feet before he managed to free himself. But perhaps the most shocking account comes from Stella Brooks, who describes how her husband was shot after demanding a refund for his bus fare.²⁷

The mindset which permeated the atmosphere is also evident in handwritten letters King received:

God do not intend the White People and the Negro to go to gather if he did we would be the same.

²³ See the sermon entitled “What is Man?” in King, *Strength to Love*, 108–09.

²⁴ See the sermon entitled “A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart” in *Ibid.*, 1–19.

²⁵ See the sermon entitled “Love in Action” in *Ibid.*, 30–40.

²⁶ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 26, 128.

²⁷ Brooks' husband was shot and abused by a policeman, who responded to the driver's call. For details of this and other testimonies, see *Ibid.*, 127–128.

You niggers are getting your self in a bad place. The Bible is strong for segregation as of the Jews concerning other races. It is even for segregation between the 12 tribes of Israel. We need and will have a Hitler to get our country straightened out.²⁸

Most striking about these letters is their appeal to the bible for support of segregation. When taken in conjunction with the testimonies given above, one cannot avoid the impression that many equated being black with being subhuman. How else can one justify calling other people “apes” or “cows?” Or the hypocrisy that existed in the court system? Only, of course, by failing to recognize in each person the image of God. This was for King the byproduct of discrimination and segregation, working together to strip men of their dignity and rob them of their freedom.²⁹ Nevertheless, the stage was set for a movement to begin.

Theology in Action

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Park’s refusal to relinquish her seat on a Montgomery bus resulted in her being arrested.³⁰ By way of response, various leaders in the black community were in favor of boycotting the bus system, and after receiving the approval of the people, decided to do so on December 5. On this day, blacks refrained from using buses for transportation, choosing instead to walk, ride mules, or take cabs. So successful was the event that ministers Ralph Abernathy, E. D. Nixon, and E. N. French organized a group—the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA)—to provide order and direction for the protest. King was unanimously elected to be President.

²⁸ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 112. The grammatical errors in these letters are noted by King, who preserves them exactly as received.

²⁹ This sentence is a close paraphrase of King, *Strength to Love*, 28. The sermon here is entitled “Our God is Able.”

³⁰ Park’s arrest marked “one of the first clear-cut instances in which a Negro had been convicted for disobeying the segregation law” (41). In large part, this provided the impetus for the black community’s response.

Over four-thousand attended the first meeting, where singing, scripture reading, prayer, and preaching provided a framework for the movement. “It was the Sermon on the Mount,” writes King, “rather than a doctrine of passive resistance, that initially inspired the Negroes to dignified, social action. It was Jesus of Nazareth that stirred the Negroes to protest with the creative weapon of love.”³¹

King outlines six aspects³² of his nonviolent philosophy: (1) although nonviolent resistance is physically passive, it is spiritually active, seeking to persuade men of wrongdoing via the emotions and will; (2) the goal of nonviolence is reconciliation with a brother, and not humiliation of an opponent; (3) nonviolence attacks the evil in man rather than the man himself; (4) nonviolent resistance is a call to accept suffering without inflicting it on others; (5) nonviolent resistance avoids both external and internal violence. He refuses to shoot or hate his opponent, choosing instead to love him; (6) nonviolent resistance is rooted in the belief that God is on the side of justice.³³

Earlier, the question was raised: how can one use the gospel to address various societal evils? In my opinion, the six principles outlined above supply us with a wonderful example. Not only did the movement bring together men and women from different backgrounds and denominations, it succeeded in obtaining a legislative order which ended segregation. From a practical standpoint, the seed of transformation sprouted when individuals translated the gospel

³¹ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 66. Cf the similar statement on Ibid., 69: “To meet hate with retaliatory hate would do nothing but intensify the existence of evil in the universe. Hate begets hate; violence begets violence... We must meet the forces of hate with the power of love.” Important to note here, is that King’s interpretation of Mt. 5.39 was radically altered after reading Gandhi. He came to see that turning the other cheek was not just for individuals combatting other individuals, but also for races and nations in conflict (78).

³² Ibid., 83–88.

³³ King would later say: “Remember... if I am stopped, this movement will not stop, because God is with the movement.” See Ibid., 117–18.

from the abstract and applied it to concrete situations. These principles were not merely proclaimed with the mouth but lived out in day to day life. When hateful notes were written, when jail was the verdict, when houses were bombed, people responded with the nonviolent message of Jesus, choosing to see suffering as in some way redemptive of the person they eventually hoped to win over. All of which brings to mind the triangle metaphor which aptly captures the heart of King's *both-and gospel*: love for God, love for self, and love for others.

Roughly a year after the bus boycott began, a court order mandating integration (December 20, 1956) was put into effect for Montgomery, Alabama. From 1957-1964, other notable events occurred, including efforts to implement desegregation in Arkansas (1957), the sit-ins and freedom rides of the early 60s, and the Birmingham Campaign of 1963-64. Without wishing to denigrate the significance of these events, we bypass them simply because they are outside the scope of this paper. We will pick up the story again in 1965, when Archbishop Iakovos, among other civil and religious leaders, responded to Dr. King's invitation to join him in Selma. Before doing so, however, we provide biographical information of the Archbishop, with the express intent of shedding light on his cares, concerns, and motivation(s).

Archbishop Iakovos

Archbishop Iakovos, born Demetrios Coucouzes on July 29, 1911, grew up in Imbros, an island taken over by the Turks in September of 1923. At the time, "Turkish oppression was asserted in every aspect of the land,"³⁴ and this influenced many Greeks to abandon their homeland. The Coucouzes family, however, remained on the island, although Demetrios went away for a time to study theology at a seminary in Halki. Returning as a Deacon in 1934, he

³⁴ Poulos, *A Breath of God*, 45-6, 63.

founded a catechetical school at the Church of Saint Marina and was so influential as an orator that the Turkish authorities forbade him from preaching.³⁵ Shortly thereafter and out of obligation to the Turkish government, he served as secretary in an army hospital, where he encountered “taunts, scornful looks and verbal abuse,”³⁶ all of which facilitated his desire to go to America.

Arriving in the US, Deacon Iakovos was ordained to the priesthood in 1940, elevated to the episcopacy in 1954, and became an Archbishop in 1959. As far as his motivations were concerned, pride of place must be given to his ultimate goal: “the advancement of Orthodoxy in the Americas.”³⁷ Phrases like this are quoted so often in articles and books that one might be led to question the authenticity of the Archbishop’s involvement in social affairs. Such doubts, however, appear to be misguided, because in his own words, “[a] non-relevant church is not worthy of its mission.”³⁸ Given the scope of his social concern, which included, among other things, a desire to see better relations between Christians and Jews, opposition to Vietnam, pressing for the rights of Palestinians, and advocating for the passage of the Civil Rights Act, it is probable that the Archbishop maintained a *both-and* position, although he certainly stressed increasing “the visibility and witness of Greek and Eastern Orthodoxy in the Western hemisphere.”³⁹

³⁵ Poulos, *A Breath of God*, 63.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 31, 110. Archbishop Iakovos is quoted in the *New York Times* as saying that one of his major goals was ‘to have the Orthodox Church be accepted by the family of religions in the United States.’ See Peter Steinfelds, “Greek Orthodox Bid Goodbye to Their Archbishop After 37 Years.” *New York Times*, July 1, 1996.

³⁸ As quoted by Constantelos, “The Man We Honor: Archbishop Iakovos,” 10–21, at 20.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

According to Poulos, “[w]hat makes the tenure of Archbishop Iakovos unique and precious is his preferred list of priorities which places personal contact with his people above all else.”⁴⁰ In particular, he took a special interest in the welfare of the Church’s young people and was the “first priest to introduce the Youth Vespers, held each Sunday evening with speakers representing all faiths.”⁴¹ Besides what has already been mentioned, the scope of the Archbishop’s involvement is demonstrated by photos of him playing baseball with children, sitting at school graduations, standing next to Billy Graham, receiving the Medal of Freedom from Jimmy Carter, and even sojourning to Mount Sinai.⁴² But perhaps what he is most known for is his involvement with the Civil Rights Movement.⁴³

What led Archbishop to respond favorably to Dr. King’s call in 1965? I would argue, along with Fr. Michael Varlamos and others,⁴⁴ that it was in part because he knew what it was like to live under oppressive conditions. Recall, for instance, that in Imbros he was not only forbidden to preach, but also forced to endure verbal insults while working at a hospital.⁴⁵ This

⁴⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁴¹ Constantelos, “The Man We Honor: Archbishop Iakovos,” 10–21, at 14. Concern is also shown for youth who had become enslaved to drug addiction. An encyclical from October 13, 1968, contains the following: “It is especially fitting therefore, that we dedicate our prayers for the deliverance of those who have fallen victims to this temptation, and ask Almighty God to restore them in mind and body to the homes and broken hearts of those who love them and pray for their recovery.” See Stanley S. Harakas, “Orthodox Social Conscience: Archbishop Iakovos, 1959-1979,” in *Orthodox Theology and Diakonia*, ed. Demetrios Constantelos (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1981), 187–208, at 203–04.

⁴² These pictures, among others, are preserved in Poulos, *A Breath of God*.

⁴³ Recommended here are Michael Varlamos, “His Eminence Archbishop Iakovos & the Civil Rights Movement: Selma, 1965,” Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, <http://www.goarch.org/archdiocese/departments/ecumenical/mlk/iakovos-civilrights>; Al Raboteau, “In the World, Not of the World: For the Sake of the World: Orthodoxy and American Culture.” *Orthodoxy in America Lecture Series* (April 4, 2006): 1–16; Stanley S. Harakas, “Orthodox Social Conscience,” 187–208, at 187.

⁴⁴ Besides the sources in the note above—Varlamos and Raboteau (p. 4)—see also Poulos, *A Breath of God*, 123.

⁴⁵ See pp. 10–11.

was, of course, not the only reason. Excerpts from the Archbishop make it clear that he considered racism one of many social issues the Church must fight:

Our contribution to the abolition of racial segregation and in behalf of social justice are of a most imperative nature. Our contributions to the war against ignorance, poverty, and other physical and moral dangers...are among our sacred obligations.⁴⁶

I came to this Memorial Service because I believe this is an appropriate occasion not only to dedicate myself as well as our Greek Orthodox Communicants to the noble cause for which our friend, The Reverend James Reeb, gave his life; but also in order to show our willingness to continue this fight against prejudice, bias and persecution. In this God-given cause, I feel sure that I have the full and understanding support of our Greek Orthodox faithful of America. For our Greek Orthodox Church and our people fully understand from our heritage and our tradition such sacrificial involvement. Our Church has never hesitated to fight, when it felt it must, for the rights of mankind; and many of our Churchmen have been in the forefront of these battles time and time again.⁴⁷

Preserved above are certain terms—*our, obligations, show, understand*—demonstrating that the Archbishop saw his efforts as communal, necessary, incarnational, and empathetic, all of which are necessary if a church is to successfully engage a specific context. When one adds to this list a willingness to suffer for the transformation of others, one embodies the message of Jesus, in whom the theologies of King and Archbishop Iakovos were deeply rooted. In the lives of both men, the following convergences emerge: a willingness to join in and listen to the sufferings of others, drawing from personal experience; a commitment to involvement with regional/national groups (NAACP, Alabama Council, WCC); a passion for speaking the truth in love; a use of their God-given talents to serve others; an emphasis on retaining both the spiritual and social elements of the gospel; and a willingness to embrace suffering and stand alone.

⁴⁶ Cited here by Constantelos, “Orthodox Theology and Diakonia,” 1–21, at 20.

⁴⁷ As found in Michael Varlamos, “His Eminence Archbishop Iakovos & the Civil Rights Movement: Selma, 1965,” [Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, http://www.goarch.org/archdiocese/departments/ecumenical/mlk/iakovos-civilrights](http://www.goarch.org/archdiocese/departments/ecumenical/mlk/iakovos-civilrights).

Orthodox Church and Blacks⁴⁸

I began this paper by noting the Orthodox desire to engage the black community. By looking at the theologies of Dr. King and Archbishop Iakovos, my goal was to demonstrate an example of what it means for the church to embrace a theology of presence. Although we live in a different day and time, we are charged with the same task they were: to spread the gospel. This must be done creatively, and within the realm of the talents and gifts that God has given each of us. The success attributed to Dr. King and Archbishop Iakovos is due to the fact that they embraced a view of the gospel that led to action, and not mere profession. If the Orthodox Church is to continue to make inroads with the black community, there must be more emphasis on *going and showing* and less stress on *coming and seeing*. As long as people fail to see a particular group represented in their worship, the preceding suggestion remains supported.

There is room in Orthodoxy to embrace a position of *both-and*: “Let us go and show so that people might come and see.” Success in Orthodox outreach efforts such as *Focus* and Reconciliation Ministries demonstrates the fruit of this perspective. Is it not the case, as Abbot Gerasim mentions, that evangelistic growth comes through first listening and learning about the culture: “If we are going to offer them our story, we must take care to understand theirs...Without making someone else our brother or sister first, we will not have their ear.”

In my research, I was led to consider the book *An Unbroken Circle*, and was enthralled by the historical roots of African Christianity. It is certainly true, as Father Jerome Sanderson points out, that in the West, blacks have in many ways “been deprived of the rich treasures of saintly lives that could inspire them.”⁴⁹ He mentions, among others, the following African saints:

⁴⁸ A significant portion of my research involved considering this issue. Due to time constraints, however, this section is not as thorough as I originally intended; it was written in haste! Plans to expand are forthcoming.

Perpetua and Felicity, Cyprian of Carthage and Saint Mary of Egypt. The Orthodox Church has and should continue to correct this Western tendency. Albert Raboteau picks up this theme, noting, in addition to historical resonances between Orthodox and African spirituality, seven spiritual resonances: (1) an emphasis on the close relationship between the divine and human; (2) an understanding of God dwelling with the living departed; (3) a view of the material world as imbued with spiritual power; (4) the person as a nexus of relationships; (5) humans as children of God with a spark of chi; (6) a lack of dichotomy between body and spirit; (7) “a tone of sad joyfulness” in African spirituals.⁵⁰ Making these known might be a powerful evangelistic tool for *some* African- Americans. They will come to see the Orthodox Church as a place “for them too.”

On a more practical level, an initial step has already been taken at St Vladimir’s Seminary, what with the formation of a chapter for St. Moses the Black. The employment of qualified black faculty in Orthodox institutions, as well as appropriately recruiting African-American seminarians, could be additional steps that would have a future impact on diversifying the Church. Hosting conferences that speak to racial issues may also prove fruitful. I conclude with some suggestions offered by Catharine Watson:

To reach out to African Americans, we need to become aware of their culture, attend their churches, invite them into our churches...I propose that we start by going to them, not expect them to come to us. Works of faith can present social programs such as soup kitchens, providing a free ‘shopping center’ at Christmas, food drives, providing transportation for those needing to get to doctors, and even neighborhood twelve-step programs done in conjunction with a local church.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Jerome Sanderson, “African Pillars of the Church,” in *An Unbroken Circle: Linking Ancient African Christianity to the African-American Experience*. (St. Louis, MO: Brotherhood of Saint Moses the Black, 1996), 16–25, at 16.

⁵⁰ Albert Raboteau, “Afterword,” in *An Unbroken Circle: Linking African Christianity to the African-American Experience* (St. Louis, MO: The Brotherhood of St. Moses the Black, 1996), 161–163.

⁵¹ Catharine Watson, “African-American Encounter with Orthodoxy,” (master’s thesis, St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 2003), 22.

These suggestions are in effect creative efforts to link the gospel to a contextual concern. As we continue to wrestle with how to communicate the gospel to others, let us find an example in those who have preceded us: first reaching up to God, and then reaching out to people.

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