

The Audacity of Hope

Chris L. Brady

Charles Wesley and the Methodist or Evangelical revival movement was a movement of renewal. The churches of the eighteenth century needed a flame to fuel the fires of renewal as they faced the dilemmas of ministering amidst diverse social stratification. Similarly, many African American churches today are situated in the context of static demographics due to urban dilapidation and suburban sprawl. However, God's dream for the church is never to retreat, but rather to act incarnationally through the power of the Holy Ghost to proclaim the reality of eschatological hope as part of the reign of God. African American Churches desiring to engage in life-changing ministries to their communities must do so with a theology of hope, hospitality and grace measured by the biblical principles of "love of God and love of neighbor." Any vision for a paradigm of evangelism and renewal, particularly as it relates to urban and inner city areas must consist of a praxis-based missional ecclesiology that takes into account the concerns and context of the surrounding community. Regardless of location, any church willing to minister in challengingly diverse contexts must possess an "audacity of hope" that intentionally, authentically and simultaneously engages its community in three ways: in an environment of hospitality and grace, incarnationally, and with evangelistic

relevance all undergirded by a strong theology of Word and Table.

Learning Hospitality: Singing and the Table

A major theme of any paradigm of evangelism should be a theology of hospitality and grace and involve the balanced partaking of Word and Table, by which the church is individually and collectively renewed as she finds her place in God's story of salvation as a faithful living witness.

As a preacher and author of hymns, Charles Wesley understood the preached

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and sung Word as essential keys to renewal. Charles clearly recognized the important conjunction between preaching and singing and their implications for shaping beliefs and renewing the spirits of God's people. His genius lies in the fact that early on he understood the power of singing to invite persons into relationships. Further, his communion hymns witness to his recognition of the dynamic power of the preached and sung Word in tandem with the Holy Spirit to spur

revival in the church, especially when yoked to the Table.

Likewise, the African American Christian church has historically understood the interrelated dynamic between preaching and singing in worship and its important connection to social action and community. We only have to look to the civil rights movement as a prime example. The African American church has lived by the ethos that the work of God's people in worship (leitourgia) should never be separated from contextual possibilities to address healing of the community within the church and without. This is especially true when preaching and singing are enacted in concert with Holy Communion.

Remembrance is one of the essential keys to renewal in the African American church and community. Traditionally, in the African American church, Communion Sunday is the one Sunday in the month in which every seat in the church is certain to be filled. As a child, I was always cognizant that something special occurred on the "first Sunday" because all of the senior or "seasoned" ladies of the community were dressed in white and wearing big hats. The altar was draped with white linen cloths. The Word, both in preaching and singing made specific connections to the table that was laid before us. It was not uncommon for the pastor to "line out" a hymn. The hymn most vivid in my memory

is “Father, I Stretch My Hands to Thee.” Many do not know that this is a Charles Wesley Hymn. The hymn speaks to the need for a renewed sense of life predicated on the sacrifice of Christ and the power of the Spirit. Singing the words of this hymn in preparation for Communion reminded us that the fuel needed to flame the fire and desire for our mission in the world was linked to the nourishment of our souls fed at the Table. Each time we took communion it was as if we were attending a mini-revival – a time for the renewing of the mind, body and spirit and re-commitment to God’s purposes for our lives and anticipation (prolepsis) for what was to come.

Charles Wesley understood singing to be an important means of Christian formation. He clearly recognized that in singing hymns we are reminded (anamnesis) of what God has done for us, what God is doing with us, and what God can do through us. When what we sing confirms what is faithfully preached and declared in scripture and helps to compel Christian communities to actively practice their faith it becomes a means of grace. Further, the preached and sung Word coupled with the Table serve as a paradigm for re-membering us as a community of hope poised to be agents of renewal for our communities because of the grace of God.

Practical Evangelistic Relevance for Community

We must embrace a Spirit-filled life of active engagement with and in the world. The strong “call and response” tradition to the preached and sung Word in the African American tradition must be resurrected and resonate in concrete and intentional mission ministry. In response to the renewing power of the preaching and singing of the Word and rising from the Table having been transformed by body and blood of Christ we must now become the incarnational presence of Christ in the community.

African American churches that engage in holistic ministries of renewal in their communities participate in the renewing vision of God’s shalom. From its inception at Pentecost, the church is designed to be an instrument for healing a fragmented and dysfunctional world. The church’s ministry is one of reconciliation through healing. A community that is fragmented

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is a community that cannot realize the love of Christ, embrace the hope of resurrection, or live peacefully with sisters and brothers. Not unlike some churches, neighborhoods are broken and in need of the salvific balm of healing because they no longer understand what it means to be community. The church, when living out its mandate to be koinonia (community), presents a prime example of a healed community that has been liberated from fragmentation, dis-ease, and maladies of narcissistic behavior that drives individuals to seek solace in detrimental practices

Playground Ministry: A Living Witness

The fragmentation of life in many neighborhoods is compounded by the lack of visible possible community. The breakdown of society at the macro level is merely an amplification of the deterioration of communal life witnessed in local neighborhoods. It is the Word and Table that teach the Christian community how to work together, play together and negotiate the obstacles of life together. If we are going to develop a sense of re-newed community within the church and in the neighborhoods that the physical church building resides, then the body of Christ must be an effective witness to the truth that God desires to see communities flourish.

At one time, the playground served as a source of life for the community. It was where children and adults learned to work and play together. However, society has become increasingly private, and playgrounds have been replaced by jungle gyms in backyards. The playground, once a place for developing interpersonal social skills and neighborly community has now become a dilapidated junkyard of broken swings sets, a haven for teenagers hiding from truancy officers, and a place to meet drugs dealers.

My church, like many, is located within blocks of at least three other churches. Together they form a ‘holy’ perimeter encircling a dilapidated playground. In

coming together as the body of Christ, putting aside non-essential theological differences, and uniting with

concerned local community leaders these churches could revitalize that playground by ‘working’ together to refurbish its equipment and then daily taking time to ‘play’ together and pray together on that playground; thereby, exemplifying through living witness a real sign of shalom.

Charles Wesley recognized that the sung Word and the Table offered the presence and reality of Christ in the world and would renew the church for its missional purpose. Similarly, when we faithfully join our voices together in unison to sing of the grace of God and partake of the spiritually nourishing sustenance of the Table we are able to recover the vitality necessary to actively engage in missions so that we can be living testimonies to true life in our communities. Evangelistic revival in our churches and transformation for our communities will take place when we are present and forming holy relationships with each other and with the community. If we are to be God’s instruments of renewal we need to be where the Spirit of Christ crosses boundaries and permeates the obstacles that separate churches, communities and individuals. □

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