**Biblical Studies: “God Through the Complexity of the Black Church.”**

And in the conclusion of this first half of LIFE Academy are left with the abiding question, “Who is God?” For the atheist, the agnostic and the growing group known as “the nones,”[[1]](#footnote-1) defining God is an act in futility. Having had many of their questions about God ignored, marginalized or insufficiently answered, there is a growing group of people who have become dissatisfied with the people and the place where the question of God’s identity was most often looked to for answers; that place is the church.

While the Scriptures, experience and reasoning provide three parts of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of theological thought, it is the tradition primarily lived through the Christian Church, its teachings and culture, that have been the anchor for our understanding of who God is. In particular, the Black Church has drawn at least half of its definition of God from the pulpit, the songs of the church, and the Sunday School room. The other half has come from the African experience in America and is still being shaped today.

That is why the sharp growth of young, Black atheist has become a part of not only the movement to deconstruct Christianity, but also the decentralization of the God and the Church in the Black community. The Black Church will have to make some serious decisions about its theology, for therein still lies a great deal of the Black community’s defining of God. Therefore, the understanding of God in today’s society – especially amongst Black people – is dependent on the integrity of the work of the Black church. While no person’s definition of God will tarnish or expand the efficacy of who God truly is, it is the roles we assign to God from our perspective that will help determine how believers serve God and how seekers can find or forget God.

Rev. Dr. Raphael G. Warnock, pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta and US Representative for the state of Georgia, helps us understand the Black Church’s efficacy in his book *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety & Public Witness*. Warnock identifies the movements of Black Theology, spending much of his literary energy on the Black liberation theologians of the late 20th Century. King, Cone, Canon and a host of womanist theologians and other activists helped to take the Black church out of the confines of antebellum faith and into a more empowering and inclusive faith. However, Warnock argues that the Black Church’s struggle remains between the notion of desiring freedom and living liberated. In the first, God will help us survive the struggle for freedom. This is a God who is rarely questioned and often existentially assumed. In the second, God has given all of humanity equality and equity, and are therefore demanded wherever they are lacking. This is a God who is questioned whenever the promise of liberation is still forthcoming.

It is challenging to understand who God is to us now when we are betwixt and between the God of our salvation and the God coming redemption. Furthermore, is God only to be understood in the context of God’s holiness and what the Bible speaks of God; or is God best understood by the lived experience of humanity. Whose perspective do we choose when answering the question, “Who is God?” For many within the Black Church the answer will always be personal. For those on the fence or have made a life without the Black Church, unanswered questions have shaped their definition of God. Various denominations of the church have placed centuries of perspective about who they believe God is. It is a question that may never be fully answered.

**Christian Theology: denominational theologies in Christianity. Identifying and constructing your theology.**

When examining the various mainline Protestant denominations of the Christian Church, the nuances, as well as the stance differences find homes into the homes and places of worship that have traditions that cross paths.

Methodism began with John and Charles Wesley who believed in the renewal and revival of the worldview of believers. This perspective sought to marshal the effort of those who already accepted Christ to go and win souls for Christ.[[2]](#footnote-2) God is a god of conversion from sinner to a saint who lives a transformed life by way of methodological rituals.

Baptist theology emphasizes faith, the act of baptism, conversion and strict adherence to personal and corporate devotions (Scripture reading, prayer, and fellowship). Obedience to God is central. Therefore, God is realized through rituals, but there is an emphasis on the piety of the priesthood of believers.

Presbyterianism gives great emphasis to the sovereignty of God, the Word of God and sees grace through faith in Christ as essential to relationship with God. This understanding of God places less action on humanity – except to yield to God – and more impetus on God’s part to establish relationship.

Pentecostalism relies heavily on personal piety and relationship through revelation that comes from the Holy Spirit. Signs and gifts from the Holy Spirit of God are necessary evidence of God’s presence and the believers relationship with God. Speaking in “tongues,” empowerment to do the superhuman or miraculous are but a few of the proofs of authentic relationship with God.

While these are some of the marks of relationship with God, and how each group sees God alive and moving, they are not isolated to the denominations that subscribe to them. For example: one may hear people speaking in tongues in a Baptist community. Therefore, whether believers subscribe to one, some or all of the tenants of each denominations definitions of relationship with God, the crucial question is how do we determine who God is and that we have an authentic relationship with our God? And, is the Black Church positioned for a fresh understanding (not necessarily new) of who God is because of the diminishing sizes of congregations and the reduced adherence to the existence of God in the Black community?

**Is the Black Church Dead?**

In 2010, Dr. Eddie Glaude, professor of African American Studies at Princeton University, public theologian and recently converted Christian wrote an article in the Huffington Post entitled the Black Church is Dead. Here is some of what he wrote:

“The Black Church, as we've known it or imagined it, is dead. Of course, many African Americans still go to church…the idea of this venerable institution as central to black life and as a repository for the social and moral conscience of the nation has all but disappeared.”

“First, *black churches have always been complicated spaces*…Second, *African American communities are much more differentiated*…Thirdly, and this is the most important point, we have witnessed *the routinization of black prophetic witness*. Too often the prophetic energies of black churches are represented as something inherent to the institution, and we need only point to past deeds for evidence of this fact. Sentences like, ‘The black church has always stood for...’ ‘The black church was our rock...’ ‘Without the black church, we would have not...’ In each instance, a backward glance defines the content of the church's stance in the present -- justifying its continued relevance and authorizing its voice. Its task, because it has become alienated from the moment in which it lives, is to make us venerate and conform to it.

But such a church loses it power. Memory becomes its currency. Its soul withers from neglect. The result is all too often church services and liturgies that entertain, but lack a spirit that transforms, and preachers who deign for followers instead of fellow travelers in God.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

With these schathing definitions of the current state of the Black Church, it may suggest that our place of getting answers about who God is could be damaged.

So, who is God? Who is God to you? And where do you go to find answers to those questions? Christ presented another time that would make defining who God is difficult:

Matthew 24:

“As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. 2Then he asked them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

3When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” **4Jesus answered them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. 5For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Messiah!’ and they will lead many astray. 6And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. 7For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: 8all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs.**

**9“Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. 10Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. 11And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. 12And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. 13But the one who endures to the end will be saved.** 14And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come.

22And if those days had not been cut short, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. 23Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look! Here is the Messiah!’ or ‘There he is!’—do not believe it. 24For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. 25Take note, I have told you beforehand. 26So, if they say to you, ‘Look! He is in the wilderness,’ do not go out. If they say, ‘Look! He is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. 27For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 28Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

**29“Immediately after the suffering of those days**

**the sun will be darkened,**

**and the moon will not give its light;**

**the stars will fall from heaven,**

**and the powers of heaven will be shaken.**

**30Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see ‘the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven’ with power and great glory. 31And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.**”

[[4]](#footnote-4)

In times like these, who do believe God is?

1. From the Pew Research Center article “Religious ‘Nones’ in America: Who They Are and What They Believe.” <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From the site Christianiy.com and its article “The Methodist Church and Beliefs: 10 Things Everyone Should Know.”

   <https://www.christianity.com/church/denominations/what-is-methodism-10-things-to-know-about-methodists.html#:~:text=John%20Wesley%20coined%20the%20term%20%E2%80%9Cagree%20to%20disagree.%E2%80%9D&text=Though%20they%20both%20debated%20intensely,those%20with%20whom%20he%20disagreed>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. From the Huffington Post article “The Black Church is Dead” <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-black-church-is-dead_b_473815> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](https://ref.ly/logosres/nrsv?ref=BibleNRSV.Mt24.1&off=66&ctx=1%E2%80%932%3b+Lk+21%3a5%E2%80%936)%0a24+%E2%80%A2~As+Jesus+came+out+of) (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), Mt 24:1–51. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)