



The Black Church

THIS IS OUR STORY, THIS IS OUR SONG



DISCUSSION GUIDE

Illustration by Ekuia Holmes

You can use this discussion guide on your own or as part of a group. It is a tool intended to invite conversation and critical thinking around *The Black Church: This is Our Story, This Is Our Song*, airing February 16 and 17 at 8:00 p.m. CST/9:00 p.m. EST on PBS stations nationwide (check local listings) and on the PBS Video app. For more information, you can preorder the companion book written by Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., available everywhere books are sold on February 16.

HOUR 01

The Miracle of the Black Church

In this first hour, we witness the miraculous birth of the Black church in America. Miraculous because the Black Christian church is born from and sustained by a people who brought to it a variety of religious traditions, from traditional ancestor worship to Islam to a form of Catholicism practiced in the Congo since the 15th century. Miraculous, too, because its spark was fanned to a flame by people who were not always given a full accounting of the Bible. Many passages, including the entire Book of Exodus with its focus on God's love for and liberation of an enslaved population, were stripped

out of Bibles made available to slaves. Freedom for slaves, according to the gospel of the slave holders, was only about spiritual freedom in the next life, not physical freedom in this one.

White men wielded a perverted form of the gospel against slaves, teaching them that Christianity freed their souls while their bodies remained in slavery. Still, slaves found Jesus, One who understood their struggle and desired to free them in this life and the next. The Black church was not just a miracle; it was a place of hope and comfort for a people whose circumstances gave them little of either.

Discussion Questions

1. This first hour talks about the varied religious traditions African slaves brought with them to American shores and the many ways that these slaves, exposed to Christianity in America, found hope and nourishment in it. How did African Americans adapt Christianity to nurture themselves? How did they come to understand Christianity as a religion that could nurture them?
2. Slave owners were, at times, reluctant to convert enslaved Black people to Christianity for fear it would inspire slaves to hope for—and seek—freedom. Why would slave owners be afraid that the message of Christianity would move slaves to desire freedom? What does the choice to offer only a truncated version of the Scriptures to slaves say about the idea that slave-owning Christians were just products of their time rather than deliberately unjust?
3. Why do you think slave owners hide the Exodus story from slaves? Why do you think slaves who knew of Exodus gravitated toward the story? What was comforting about it for them?
4. The first hour of *The Black Church* tells us that slaves gravitated to Jesus and found liberation in the Cross. How might the message of Christ and the Cross be liberating to people in physical slavery?
5. Why did Richard Allen start the African Methodist Episcopal Church?
6. What role did the Great Awakening and the Second Great Awakening play in the growth and development of the Black church? How did the evangelical view of spiritual equality shape theological and political views?
7. How have you seen “the stained-glass ceiling” play out in your own experience?
8. How might understanding the origins of the Black church help us to better understand the present-day concerns of the Black church and Black people regarding justice and equality?
9. What gave the Black church hope that things may not be better for them but would be for their children?

The Community of the Black Church

During the Civil War and in its wake, the Black church became the core of the community for freed African American men and women. Enslaved men and women had not been able to gather together under any roof but the rooves of their churches and praise houses. Many in the immediate aftermath of the war did not have homes or jobs, but they had their church.

The Black church blossomed into a powerful force during Reconstruction. Churches became centers of faith and also of learning: literacy and job skills were taught after services by leaders and laypeople alike. Church members pooled their resources to help one another through hard times, forming a robust social safety net. (Note: In many ways the early Black church resembles the early church as it is described in Acts. Members held all things in common and pooled resources as needed.) Church leaders became community leaders, even political leaders. Both President Lincoln and General Sherman consulted with Black church leaders when determining policy in the Black community and, more broadly, the postwar South.

Professor Reginald F. Hildebrand and narrator Skip Gates point to the death of the Reverend Richard Harvey Cain in 1887 as marking a turning of the tide as the gains Blacks made during Reconstruction began to be thwarted. Recognized as a scholar and as a Congressman, Cain embodied the new paths opening to Blacks after the Civil War. “But he lived long enough,” Hildebrand laments, “to see much of what he’d worked for unraveled.” State after state began curtailing or even stripping away Black voting rights. During this new Jim Crow era, Black citizens, pushed out of public spaces and institutions, retreated to the refuge of their churches.

In 1895 Henry McNeal Turner, at the first gathering of the National Baptist Convention, began to preach about the importance of understanding Black men and women as created in the image of God: “I worship a Negro God,” Turner said, “I believe God is a Negro. Negroes should worship a God who is a Negro. ... Lord have mercy on any race of people who do not think they look like God.” Turner’s words did not go over well at first, and yet they planted the seeds for what would become known

as Black theology, rooted in the notion that all men and women have an inherent dignity because they look like God and God looks like them. The women of the Black church took this message to heart and found the courage to debate the call, and the right,

to preach, to be in their own missionary organizations and to control the funding of those organizations. This dawning of gender consciousness led to the late 19th century being called the Women's Era of the Black church.

Discussion Questions

1. Lincoln is known as the Great Emancipator, the president who freed the slaves. Does it change his legacy to know that, while he wanted to free slaves, he thought they should be sent back to Africa? What was the response of the Black spiritual leaders of his day to this proposal? What does it say about the power of the nascent Black church that Lincoln sought out the opinions of Black religious leaders even before he signed the Emancipation Proclamation?
2. Why do you think there were mass conversions to Christianity during the Civil War?
3. In this hour, composer W. C. Handy is quoted: "Spirituals did more to free my people than all the guns of the Union." What is it about spirituals that could help people to be free?
4. How did the Black church understand and address the needs of newly freed men and women in the post-Civil War South? What secular needs did the church seek to address? What spiritual needs?
5. Many historically Black colleges and universities began as seminaries to train up preachers. How did the focus on education mesh with the early goals of the Black church?
6. What was the struggle between Black churches in the North and Black churches in the South? How were both attempting the same goal?
7. What about the Black church during this period made them a hub of political strength and forward movement? Why do you think the Black church was unafraid to marry church and state?
8. Do you feel the motto of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, "Lifting As We Climb," has resonance today? Why or why not?
9. What denomination grew out of the holiness movements and the spreading appreciation for ecstatic worship? Why is it notable that they transcended race and gender in their members and clergy?

HOUR 03

The Prophetic Voice of the Black Church

The third hour of *The Black Church* focuses on the Jim Crow era in the South, which was the white pushback at the turn of the 20th century against gains made by the Black community during Reconstruction. Members of the Black church began to move beyond the steps of the sanctuary, applying the notion of equality of all before God to the wider world. They sought to free Black people from the strictures of segregation and to seek full participation in the country and its institutions. This outward focus would eventually become the basis of the Civil Rights Movement.

As the American South became less hospitable to Black men and women, many moved to the industrial North and West in what would come to be known as The Great Migration. They followed the promise of better work and more freedom but found life in the North to be similarly rife with discrimination. Migrants also found themselves without the community and safety net they'd had in the South. Black churches in the North made great efforts to help new migrants in their congregations both spiritually and materially. This commitment to

supporting church members in this life as well as the next built upon and expanded the foundation of the social gospel of the late 19th century, Christianity's attempt to address social and economic problems. Churches began to more comprehensively address their members' physical needs by offering health care and by increasing efforts to teach job skills like tailoring and literacy.

The Black church struggled with internal divisions between North and South and over the roles of women, as well as external oppression from a segregated society, but its ability to weave together the sacred and the secular became one of its strengths. Artists like Rosetta Tharpe brought musical structures from popular music to their religious songs and found a way to use their musical gifts to bless both the church and secular society. As gospel musician Bebe Winans puts it, while some felt God's music should only be played in God's house, others felt Tharpe and musicians like her were following God's admonition to take the Word out into the world, "to the highways and the hedges." Blues and jazz artists, meanwhile, steeped in generations of church musical traditions, drew

on religious music in their secular work. The tension between sacred and secular was always there, but artists like gospel songwriter Thomas Dorsey and singer Mahalia Jackson demonstrated the power in seeing music, in the words of Juilliard's Fredara Hadley, as a spiritual imperative as well as a commercial one.

The Civil Rights Movement rose out of the Black church as a way to organize for justice for all people in America. Gospel music concerts helped finance civil rights marches and protests. Through this blending and working together, the Black church became a loud prophetic voice for those longing for justice in an unjust society.

Discussion Questions

1. How did Jim Crow, segregation, and blatant white supremacy hone the social gospel in Black churches?
2. What caused a division between long-standing Northern Black church members and their Southern counterparts as the latter moved north during the Great Migration? How did it reflect the different approaches to worship taken by rural churches and urban ones? How did this divide spur the growth of the race-record market in the recording industry?
3. Black society sought to critique the ever-present undercurrents of white supremacy politically, through the Civil Rights Movement, and theologically, through the rise of the Nation of Islam. How were these two critiques similar? How did they differ?
4. In this hour, we're told that gospel music concerts become a way to finance the Civil Rights Movement and that gospel music was the sound of the Civil Rights Movement. How does gospel music also help find a way to include more voices, specifically the voices of women, in the push for civil rights?
5. Why did author and narrator Henry Louis "Skip" Gates interview so many musicians for this series? Why do you think he included "this is our song" in the series' title?
6. Who was Prathia Hall, and how did she contribute to Martin Luther King Jr.'s most famous speech? What does this teach us about the role of women in the Civil Rights Movement? How does her use of the phrase "I have a dream" in her memorial prayer highlight the deep connection between the Black churches and the Civil Rights Movement?
7. In this hour, Cornel West says, "When the Black church is the face of love and justice, it will be targeted." How do the events described in this hour show this to be true?
8. Why is it noteworthy that the teachings of Jesus were the moral foundation for civil rights leaders like King?

The Witness of the Black Church

The final hour of *The Black Church* focuses on the enduring witness of the Black church in post-Civil Rights Movement America. The hour picks up immediately after the assassination of King in Memphis. His assassination served as a turning point not just for the Civil Rights Movement but also for the Black church. After King's murder, young people began to question whether the Black church could be part of transforming American society to be more just. In 1966, secular groups like the Black Panthers, who focused on equal rights and opportunities, began to form outside of the Black church. Secular groups pushed for Black determination and saw the Black church as being too concerned with being meek and mild.

Both church groups and the secular groups wrestled with the concept of Black power. James Cone, author of the groundbreaking book *Black Theology and Black Power*, worked to translate King's message for a world saddened and enraged by his murder. Professor Barbara D. Savage explains Cone's Black

liberation theology as "a new way of looking at the relationship between Black religion and Black political struggle." Cone underscored the truth that God is on the side of the oppressed and that God identifies with the condition of the oppressed and has his heart set on liberation. In a 2008 interview, Cone described Black liberation theology "as mainly a theology that sees God as concerned with the poor and the weak."

A new generation of church leaders were inspired by King and Cone and their teachings: the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, the Rev. Al Sharpton, and the Rev. William J Barber. They wove practical daily life and politics into every aspect of their preaching.

The attempt to blend sacred and secular, church and worldly politics, occasionally drove people away from the church. The Hawkins family, rocketed to stardom by the commercial success of their gospel hit "Oh Happy Day," were considered by many as having become too worldly. The family, rather

than reconciling their views with the prevailing ones of the church, founded a storefront church of their own in Oakland, California, The Love Center. It stood at the forefront of a new era in American Christianity that recognized same-sex couples who felt alienated by the churches in which they'd been raised.

The rise of a Black middle class brought a new shift to the Black church: the embrace of the prosperity gospel. Proponents of the prosperity gospel turned away from the commitment to help the poor and oppressed, a stark contrast to the King and his followers.

In some ways, Black millennials and Gen Xers have become disenchanted with the Black church (for example, recording artist John Legend says he reveres the religious traditions but is not actively religious at present, because the church “does not connect on all the issues that we care about”); in

other ways, they have built it anew. In 1997, Kirk Franklin’s gospel hit “Stomp” became the first gospel song ever to top the Billboard R&B/Hip-Hop charts. Again and again warring factions in the Black church have sought to bridge the gap between them with music, one of the reasons Gates focused on music all throughout this series on the history of the Black church.

Today the inclusive City of Refuge church, with its message of acceptance and social commitment, and The Potter’s House, a megachurch built around the prosperity gospel, coexist. Secular activists form the backbone of the Black Lives Matter movement, but pastors are also in its ranks.

Author and narrator Gates ends the series by saying “the Black church was the place where our people, somehow, made a way out of no way. And it’s the place, after a long and tiresome journey, to which we can always return and call home.”

Discussion Questions

1. How do Henry McNeal Turner’s words about a belief in a Negro God show that the Black church is also concerned about Black determination and power?
2. What does James Cone mean when he says that white theology has no relationship to Black people? What does white theology not grasp about the Black experience in America?
3. How did the explosion of the Black middle-class help give rise to the prosperity gospel in the Black church?
4. In what ways did men like the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, and the Rev. Al Sharpton carry on the work and legacy of King?
5. Georgetown professor Michael Eric Dyson in this hour describes the birth of hip-hop in the 1980s as a form of secular preaching, a continuation of sorts of King and Cone’s call for liberation of the oppressed. Many Black church leaders of the day felt differently and condemned hip-hop and rap. Can both be right? Why or why not?

6. Why do you think the Black church has so consistently wedded their religious beliefs to their politics? What about the Black church's beliefs motivates them to take political action?
7. Why does this hour suggest that we should think of the Black church as plural and not singular?
8. In what ways is the recent Black Lives Matter movement a continuation of the Civil Rights Movement? How is it different?
9. Do you agree with Rev. William J. Barber's statement that "there is something wrong with a religion that has nothing to say about the oppressive realities that exist in life"? Why or why not? How has his Moral Monday Movement brought new members to the church's fold?
10. What do you see as the enduring witness of the Black church?

Series Reflection Questions

1. How did this series expand and deepen your view of the Black church in America?
2. What does the Black church have to teach Christians of every race about holding on to hope in the midst of suffering?
3. What is the witness of the Black church today in terms of politics and religion? What can Christians of all races learn from this witness?
4. What are the strengths of the Black church? What do you think the rest of American society can learn from them?