

FLOWING FROM AN AFRICAN  
AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY  
*Christ Is the Only Head  
of the Church*



K. Ray Hill

**T**heology evolves out of context and the Afro-Christian tradition represents the sacred confluence of African religions with Christianity that heals as well as empowers. As an indigenous American church, the Afro-Christian Convention shows how an African worldview converted Christianity to itself. The result is a commitment to foundational Christ-centered principle linked to a wholistic African perspective that nurtured dignity, self-determination, and a fierce independence in response to the challenges of racism and oppression in the church and in the world.



I am a son of the Union United Church of Christ Norfolk, Virginia. I was baptized and spiritually nurtured under the leadership of Rev. Joseph M.

Copeland. The church was formed as Union Christian in 1910. It was fully rooted and grounded in the Afro-Christian tradition.

From this humble beginning, I have served the United Church of Christ as a local church pastor and teacher, as United Church of Christ educational consultant, and program associate for the Eastern North Carolina Association. I have served on the Committee on Certification for Christian Educators for UCC, as area conference minister for the Eastern North Carolina Association, as president of the Eastern North Carolina Association, as a member of the Southern Conference of the UCC board of directors, as a UCC history and polity teacher, and as an instructor in Pastoral Leadership Development (Alternative Path to Ministry in Southern Conference). This call to service is rooted in the tenets of an Afro-Christian understanding of self and that “to whom much is given, much will be required” (Luke 12:48).

Afro-Christian theology represents our beliefs. It is the faith that keeps our minds, hearts, and souls anchored; keeps them centered in meaning and purpose amid a system and society designed to keep us as objects, as second-class citizens, as oppressed.

Our theology unfolds in the particularity of the place and time in which we find ourselves. We exist in an America that is built on racism and with a white church complicit in that racism. The Afro-Christian churches were places of resistance—resistance to enslavement in its beginning and to white supremacy today. Our theology helps people to find a sense of identity and purpose within a system meant to objectify them. An Afro-Christian identity is formed by reminding our people that God has a greater purpose for their lives than what racist societies offer them. The Afro-Christian Church gave us a place to educate ourselves and develop our gifts. It gave us a worship in which we could celebrate our blessings, gain comfort in our trials and tribulations, and take encouragement to face our challenges. All this flowed from a Word from God, expressed in prayers, songs, scriptures, and sermons. The Afro-Christian Church mobilizes the community of faith to fight for social justice and personhood.

When Blacks in the Tidewater region had an opportunity to start their own churches, beyond the control of white Christianity, in hush harbors and

later in buildings, Blacks brought what we had learned in the Christian Churches with us. Christian Churches may have allowed Blacks—free and enslaved—to be part of the white services, but this did not take away our African understanding of God. When given the freedom to express our understanding of God we did it with an African flavoring—with praise and dancing, with acknowledgement of the presence of God everywhere. And we never forgot reverence for the ancestors.

Two streams influenced Afro-Christian theology: Africa (where we first encountered the divine) and the Christian Church (our connection in the United States).

To understand Afro-Christian theology, it is important to see the theological influence of the white Christian Church through its five cardinal principles. At the same time, you cannot ignore the presence of our African understanding of God. This mixture makes it hard for some to understand how you can praise God while being oppressed. How do you develop a resistance to oppression and cruelty? By trusting a God that is bigger than your circumstance. This is not done through intellect alone but through faith.

Our theology was not *born* in slavery. It was *tested* in slavery. Our theology emerges from a belief system that began in Africa. Africa informed how we face the challenges of a new world to which we did not volunteer to come. It has been our understanding of a God we encountered in Africa that allowed the Holy Spirit to guide us to create community in a foreign land. Therefore, we are anchored in our African understanding of God while we encounter this nation with its Christian Church and its cardinal principles. Our faith would not let us forget Africa. It could not be beaten out of us. It could not be assimilated out of us. We hold fast to our African understanding of the God of our hope and deliverance.

How did this theology both African and Christian develop over time? As mentioned earlier, the published 1916 *Proceedings* documented the first fifty years of the Afro-Christian Convention and give insight into our theological development following the Civil War. First, Dr. J.H. Mabry’s “Convention Prayer” points the way:



Third, the organization, worship, and mission in Afro-Christian churches was kept simple, never complex. The deacons in charge of church affairs were ordained for life. The chairperson of the board usually remained in that office until death. The essential role of the pastor was to preach, care for the sick, and bury the dead. The congregation met to transact business when urgent matters required action by the membership. Otherwise, the congregation trusted the deacons to “fix it.”

And fourth, regular worship services moved at a slow pace, with little regard for a beginning or ending time. It was not uncommon for a service to last three hours.<sup>3</sup> Services usually followed a similar pattern:

#### **Prayer and Praise Service**

Opening Congregational Hymn  
Prayer  
Hymn  
Scripture  
Negro Spiritual  
Deacon's Prayer  
Negro Spiritual  
Announcements  
Congregational Hymn  
Sermon  
Opening Doors of the Church (music)  
Poor Saints' Offering  
Regular Offering  
Pastor's Remarks  
Closing Hymn  
Benediction

This essential character, culture, spirit, and model of organization maintains Afro-Christian churches today; those within the UCC and those beyond it.

#### **AFRO-CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH'S FIVE CARDINAL PRINCIPLES**

As was mentioned earlier, James O'Kelly, a Revolutionary War veteran, was an influential early founder of the Christian Movement. He was inspired by the call for democratic participation and leadership that he coupled with the Protestant belief in the priesthood of all believers. When O'Kelly publicly denounced slavery in 1789, many Blacks joined the Christian Churches in the South.

Many enslaved Blacks had been forced to attend worship services by the owners, but they only heard a partial gospel. It was not the full gospel of liberation and justice. They heard a message of salvation by grace, the joy of faith, and the hope of heaven, but they heard nothing about a God who will “break the yoke of their slavery and lift the heavy burden from their shoulders” (Isaiah 9:4).

The Christian Connection, which was organized in 1820, affirmed three cardinal principles or beliefs for calling together a Christian church. By 1886, two more were added. These five founding principles shaped the Christian Church and were adopted by the Afro-Christian Church. These principles were grafted into the Afro-Christian ethos and expressed with an African flavoring. To understand Afro-Christian theology, you must accept the influence of the white Christian Church's cardinal principles through a lens of its African understanding of God's presence and action in the world.

The five cardinal principles are: The Lord Jesus Christ is the only head of the Church; the name is Christian; the scriptures of the Old and New Testament are a sufficient rule of faith and practice; Christian character is a sufficient test of membership; and private judgment is the right and duty of every believer.

#### **1. Christ is the only head of the Church**

In a 1916 welcome address by Rev. C.A. Ward to the Biennial Convention, he exemplified this principle when he said, “And then friends, we welcome you because of the fact that you are evangelical—that is to say, you believe in converting the world to Jesus Christ . . . we welcome you because you believe in Jesus Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

Rev. Dr. Percel O. Alston described the Afro-Christian tradition this way:

The preaching, teaching, music, liturgy, and mission of the Afro-Christian churches all evolved out of the affirmation that Jesus Christ is the only Head of the Church. The Christocentric affirmation of Afro-Christians was not only a theological focus, but also served as a mechanism for the containment of overly aggressive and assertive pastors and deacons. When a pastor or deacon exceeded the limits of power and authority, he was reminded by members of the congregation that "Jesus Christ is the Head of this church, not you."

The preaching, singing, and shouting in the Afro-Christian churches related to African experiences. The preaching and singing looked back to African chants; the shouting was closely akin to African dance. The feeling aspect of religion dominated. One of the gifts that Afro-Christians brought to the . . . United Church of Christ, was their capacity to feel religion and express the same with fervor and great joy . . . relatively small numbers and limited geographical focus precluded their . . . visibility in the formation of the United Church of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Christian is a significant name

The affirmation is that we are followers of Jesus Christ and not the world. On September 25, 1989, during opening communion service in Miller Chapel at Princeton Seminary, Rev. Dr. Yvonne V. Delk, then executive director of the Church in Society of the United Church of Christ, preached a sermon titled "Freed to Follow" in which she affirmed what it means to claim the name Christian. She preached:

The call to follow in the promised land is different from a call to follow in the wilderness. Following in the promised land is to bless and affirm what we see here as signs of God's reign; it is identifying so closely with the culture that we become cultural tools of conformity rather than Christ's instrument of transformation. Following in the promised land is to bless

our nation right or wrong and to offer simplistic answers to complex questions. Following in the wilderness demands that we abandon our gods of arrogance, pride, nationality, class culture, race, Protestant rule, in order to be carriers of God's grace and vision into the world.

To follow in the wilderness is to abandon the nationally defined God of imperial triumphalism and to affirm covenanting God who freely chooses to enter a relationship with a people who are merely a band of enslaved people with no standing, no power, no influence in the world. This God is defined by freely offered compassion to those who by the world's definition are helpless, the oppressed, and the dispossessed. This God exists in the margin where the suffering is most severe and offers us memory, hope and compassion. This God calls us away from privatized religion that leaves behind any memory of the cost of discipleship and offers us an opportunity to be signs of hope and newness in the midst of the wilderness.<sup>6</sup>

## 3. The Bible is a sufficient rule of faith and practice

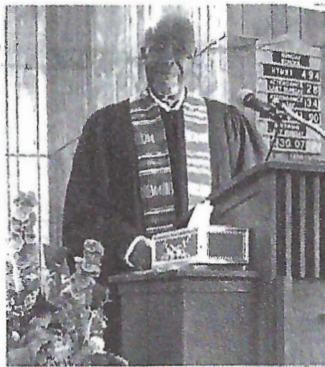
We read the Bible from the lens of our suffering and our hope. We read the Bible "African-ly." Percel O. Alston states that "preaching is central in the service of worship in Afro-Christian churches. It consisted of exegesis of biblical texts and vivid stories of biblical characters and racial oppression . . . application was always made to what was perceived as personal Christian morality and ethical behavior . . . the preaching and singing was of high emotional intensity so characteristic of the African dance and music. Preaching and singing were always punctuated with loud amens and shouts of joys."<sup>7</sup>

## 4. Christian character is a sufficient test for church membership

At the 1916 convention, Rev. S.W. Albright of the Lincoln Christian Conference preached from Romans 13:1-2 and urged that "Christian character is evidenced by obedience"<sup>8</sup> to Christ's law. According to the *Proceedings*, Christian character wasn't a principle narrowly defined by obedience to prohibitions against personal



sins like smoking and drinking, but as obedience to biblical mandates to seek justice and liberation of the oppressed. Character arises from striving for a balance between “personal piety” and “social responsibility” and seeking to live out Christ’s command to “love God and one’s neighbor” (Matthew 22:37–40). In short, one passes the “test” for membership in the church if one’s life reflects obedience to live in right relationship with Christ, the Sole Head of the Church, and in just relationship with others in the world. Character is developed by abiding commitment and courage to obey Christ’s call to and claim on one’s life. Character is a function of bold faith in God’s power and of promises made incarnate in Jesus the Christ.



*Rev. Leon White served as the final president of the North Carolina Afro-Christian Conference. He then served as the director of the Southern Regional Office of the UCC’s Scommission for Racial Justice. (White family photo).*

In 2017, Rev. Leon White, a founder of the environmental justice movement, echoed this description of Christian character and the nature of Christ’s call. He shared the following insights when asked how one could become involved environmental justice:

If you have the call, do it. As they say, if you make one step, the Lord will make two or three. You don’t get involved because you know what you are doing. You get involved because you have a zeal to try to make the wrong right. That’s all. You don’t know how you are going to do it. You just challenge the wrong, and somehow it works out. You don’t have the answer. You seek for the answer. You seek it, and you don’t know what you are doing, but you have the strength, the power, and

the knowledge to do it, but you don’t know it because you never put it to practice before. Our cup runneth over by doing. Our ancestors just did it, and they have a song they would sing, “The Lord Will Make a Way Somehow.” They didn’t know the way, but they believed that the way was in them, but they had to step out on faith to make it become a reality. In addition to character, persons were encouraged to own their own home, have good credit, to engage in community development, to reach out to others. It was important theologically to be productive and have something to show for your efforts.<sup>9</sup>

### **5. Private judgment is the right and duty of every believer**

Afro-Christian pastors, teachers, and laity used their private judgment guided by their understanding of the Bible to speak to the issue of the day. Through worship, Afro-Christians experience the presence of God revealed through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that equipped them to discern the will and the way of God. Room and space were provided for private interpretation and judgment. In sermons and Bible study, and in addressing injustices within their communities and nation, Afro-Christian men and women, lay and clergy articulated the gospel from their own perspective and through its relevance to their freedom struggle.

### **Handing Down What Has Been Taught**

The minutes of the 1916 Convention reveal the results of the Afro-Christian Convention pressing ahead in its mission and outreach. Evangelism was alive as they reached past their local context to spread the gospel both nationally and internationally. This theology continued to evolve as it moved through the periods of enslavement, Reconstruction Era, Jim Crow laws, systemic racism, and into the flourishing of Black theology.

Our theology continues to develop—always drawing from our African taproot and always pushing against racism and a complacent white church.

The Afro-Christian tradition is interwoven with the fabric of the United Church of Christ. As a local church pastor and teacher today, the theological

affirmations of the Afro-Christian Church shape my life, my service, my ministry, and my worldview. This is the teaching that has been handed down to me by many pastors and teachers who grew up in the Afro-Christian tradition.

One of the most moving pieces of evidence of theological understanding of ministry comes from Rev. Joseph Mann, who addressed the 1916 Afro-Christian Convention. As an elder at that time, one born into enslavement, Joseph Mann was looking back over his fifty years in ministry. He helped start two conferences, baptized 1,000 souls, built nineteen churches, and laid the foundation of Franklinton Christian College.<sup>10</sup>

As a child, I learned my faith from Joseph M. Copeland, a second-generation pastor who was ordained in 1952. I studied my faith and practice at Franklinton Center, a place of learning and reflection. My Afro-Christian legacy has served me well and has empowered me to share my experiences with others. Leon White and Yvonne V. Delk, both elders, mentors, and colleagues, have helped shape my vision and ministry. Their insights are representative of the critical thinking needed to address our times.

Afro-Christian ministers have always challenged the status quo of their times. In every era of the Afro-Christian Church, leaders rose up in their time and place to make a difference for the Gospel. They have come to faith, empowered by the Holy Spirit and believing that God has spoken to them to address the issues of their day—starting locally and acting nationally.

Some Afro-Christians challenged enslavement, some challenged Jim Crow laws, some promoted women's rights, some advocated for LGBTQ rights, and some challenged white supremacy—but all came out of a grassroots movement to touch the lives of everyday people with a Christian message rooted in African spirit. They adopted some of the cardinal principles and reshaped them with an African understanding of God. No matter which time period you look at, an Afro-Christian voice will speak to the times from a theological framework that is imbued with a flowing Spirit.

FLOWING IN  
CONVENTION OF THE  
*Entering the United Church  
as a United Black Pr*



Julia M. Speller

**A**fro-Christian churches and Black Congregations to develop common ground and a common agenda at the Convention of the South. This critical conversation has implications on their respective self-identities and their relationship to being Black in a majority white denomination: integrity.



My early religious journey began in 1956 at Jackson Park Church (JBCC) on the West Side of Chicago. My members of this racially integrated congregation led by David P. McMullin. We developed a close bond with the