

6

The Old Ship of Zion

More Than Just Sunday Meetings

We used to steal off to de woods and have church, like de Spirit moved us—sing and pray to our own liking and soul satisfaction—and we sure did have good meetings, honey—baptize in de river, like God said. . . . We was quiet 'nuf so de white folks didn't know we was dere, and what a glorious time we did have in de Lord.

quoted in James Mellon, *Bullwhip Days*¹

The church was a “Noah's Ark” that shielded one's life from the rain. It was the “old ship of Zion” fully capable of sailing the seas of life.

Harold Carter, *The Prayer Tradition of Black People*²

When we last visited the “Preacher from a God-fearing Plantation” in chapter 5, he had just cried out, “Lord have mercy!” Having confessed his sin, he receives Christ's

grace. “That was the greatest joy of my life. Everything was joy and peace.”³

But now what?

How did newly converted African American slaves grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ? How did they connect to one another in the body of Christ?

Our preacher friend offers us a glimpse. “Meetings back there meant more than they do now. Then everybody’s heart was in tune, and when they called on God they made heaven ring. It was more than just Sunday meeting and then no more godliness for a week. They would steal off to the fields and in the thickets and there, with heads together around a kettle to deaden the sound, they called on God out of heavy hearts.”⁴

In many creative ways, African Americans gathered for *worship* as prescribed in Hebrews 10:22–23: “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”

African Americans also used many means to assemble for *fellowship* as counseled in Hebrews 10:24–25: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Because we all too easily abandon meeting together, we have much to learn from the high priority that African American believers placed on communal worship and fellowship. As Henry Mitchell put it in *Black Church Beginnings*,

Their needs for guidance and comfort were immense. The awesome importance of this spiritual and emotional support can be seen by the fact that the time to engage in worship was taken from the already too-brief free times away from

field work. Work time already ran from sun-up to sundown. Time for worship was taken from the brief period left for the personal needs of sanitation, sleep, food, and child rearing. This spiritual nurture must have been highly treasured indeed to motivate the sacrifice of such limited and precious free time.⁵

Cross-Cultural Ministry

We find evidence from long before multiculturalism became fashionable of mutual worship and fellowship among blacks and whites. Though this was not the norm, we glean cultural competencies from these historical occurrences in which African American believers met their need for spiritual nurture *with* Caucasian believers.

Pulpit Ministry: Expounding the Scriptures Relevantly

In chapter 3 we met Solomon Northup—born free in Rhode Island, then kidnapped and enslaved in Louisiana from age thirty-three to forty-five. Though recognizing the inconsistency of his master, William Ford, a slave-owning Baptist preacher, Northup still notes, “It is but simple justice to him when I say, in my opinion, there never was a more kind, noble, candid, Christian man than William Ford.”⁶

Northup details Ford’s pastoral ministry to his slaves. “We usually spent our Sabbaths at the opening, on which days our master would gather all his slaves about him, and read and expound the Scriptures. He sought to inculcate in our minds feelings of kindness towards each other, of dependence upon God—setting forth the rewards promised unto those who lead an upright and prayerful life. . . . He spoke of the loving kindness of the Creator, and of the life that is to come.”⁷

Pastor Ford related truth to life cross-culturally. Emphasizing the two great commandments, he taught African

American believers how to love one another and how to love God. Ford highlighted the character of God and the hope of heaven. Northup even recounts how Ford's preaching led to the conviction and salvation of another slave, Sam.

Personal Ministry: Encouraging the Saints Relationally

Ford coupled his pulpit ministry with his personal ministry. Speaking of his time with Pastor Ford, Northup notes, "That little paradise in the Great Pine Woods was the oasis in the desert, towards which my heart turned lovingly, during many years of bondage."⁸ Perhaps we find it hard to imagine, but even in enslavement, even through ministry offered by a Baptist slave-owner, Northup experienced the ark of safety that is the "old ship of Zion."

What was it about Ford's life and ministry that so affected Northup? During an extended trip by horseback and on foot to the Bayou, Ford "said many kind and cheering things to me on the way."⁹ Ford knew how to speak life-giving words (see Prov. 18:21).

He also understood how to connect scriptural narratives to Northup's life narrative. "The goodness of God was manifest, he declared, in my miraculous escape from the swamp. As Daniel came forth unharmed from the den of lions, and as Jonah had been preserved in the whale's belly, even so had I been delivered from evil by the Almighty."¹⁰

In exemplary fashion, Ford also used probing soul questions and spiritual conversations as he ministered to Northup. "He interrogated me in regard to the various fears and emotions I had experienced during the day and night, and if I had felt, at any time, a desire to pray. I felt forsaken of the whole world, I answered him, and was praying mentally all the while."¹¹

Ford then artistically wove together a biblical sufferology that snugly fit Northup's unique situation. "At such times, said he, the heart of man turns instinctively towards his

Maker. In prosperity, and when there is nothing to injure or make him afraid, he remembers Him not, and is ready to defy Him; but place him in the midst of dangers, cut him off from human aid, let the grave open before him—then it is, in the time of his tribulation, that the scoffer and unbelieving man turns to God for help, feeling there is no other hope, or refuge, or safety, save in his protecting arm.”¹²

Northup testifies to Ford’s relational competence. “So did that benignant man speak to me of this life and of the life hereafter; of the goodness and power of God, and of the vanity of earthly things, as we journeyed along the solitary road towards Bayou Boeuf.”¹³ According to Northup’s assessment, Ford showed that it is impossible to convince someone of God’s goodness unless we first reflect God’s goodness.

Corporate Worship: Enjoying the Spirit Interracially

James Smith, enslaved in Northern Neck, Virginia, shares a remarkable depiction of worship during an extended revival. Many souls, both whites and blacks, were converted every night. The whites occupied the part next to the altar, while the blacks took the part assigned them next to the door, where they held a protracted meeting among themselves. “Sometimes, while we were praying, the white people would be singing, and when we were singing, they would be praying; each gave full vent to their feelings, yet there was no discord or interruption with the two services.”¹⁴

Though they were imperfectly integrated, clearly the Spirit was shepherding a movement toward mutual acceptance of cultural differences in the name of Christian salvation and growth. Given that in our day Sunday mornings are still the most segregated hours in American life, we would do well to replicate these believers’ support for one another’s unique worship styles by participating together in cross-cultural church life.

Lest we assume that these few examples were standard, John Brown, born in Talledega County, Alabama, portrays how sporadic such joint worship truly was. “Sunday was a great day around the plantation. The fields was forgotten, the light chores was hurried through, and everybody got ready for the church meeting. It was out of the doors, in the yard fronting the big lot where the Browns all lived. Master John’s wife would start the meeting with a prayer and then would come the singing—the old timey songs. But the white folks on the next plantation would lick their slaves for trying to do like we did. No praying there, and no singing.”¹⁵

On one plantation, corporate worship. On the very next, whippings for praying and singing. Such inconsistency, along with twisted sermons, differences in worship styles, and in many cases outright illegality, was what led enslaved African American Christians to birth the “Invisible Institution.”

The Invisible Institution

Historians investigating African American religious history have labeled the secretive slave worship services the “Invisible Institution” because much of it was invisible to the eyes of their masters. “In their cabins, woods, thickets, hollows, and brush arbors (shelter of cut branches also called ‘hush harbors’) throughout the South, slaves held their own religious meetings where they interpreted Christianity according to their experience, applying the stories and symbols of the Bible to make sense out of their lives.”¹⁶

Legal Mandates: Restricting Worship Judicially

Many converted slaves had no choice but to worship stealthily. For instance, in 1800, South Carolina’s legislature restricted black religious services. They forbade them “even in company with white persons to meet together and assemble

for the purpose of . . . religious worship, either before the rising of the sun or after the going down of the same.”¹⁷

An 1831 Mississippi court ruling outlawed any black from preaching. “It is unlawful for any slave, free Negro, or mulatto to preach the gospel under pain of receiving thirty-nine lashes upon the naked back of the . . . preacher.”¹⁸

Various reasons have been suggested for such laws. Peter Kalm, a Swedish traveler in America from 1748 to 1750, offers his firsthand explanation. He first bemoans the fact that “the masters of these Negroes in most of the English colonies take little care of their spiritual welfare, and let them live on in their Pagan darkness.” He next offers their warped reasoning. “There are even some, who would be very ill pleased at, and would by all means hinder their Negroes from being instructed in the doctrines of Christianity; to this they are partly led by the conceit of its being shameful, to have a spiritual brother or sister among so despicable a people; partly by thinking that they should not be able to keep their Negroes so meanly afterwards; and partly through fear of the Negroes growing too proud, on seeing themselves upon a level with their masters in religious matters.”¹⁹

Arthur Greene, enslaved in Petersburg, Virginia, depicts the secret meetings he experienced along with the punishment if caught. “Well—er talkin’ ’bout de church in dem days, we po’ colored people ain’ had none lak you have now. We jes made er bush arbor by cuttin’ bushes dat was full of green leaves an’ puttin’ ’em on top of four poles reachin’ from pole to pole. Den sometimes we’d have dem bushes put roun’ to kiver de sides an’ back from der bottom to der top. All us got together in dis arbor fer de meetin.’ Sometimes de paterollers would ketch ’em den dey whupped all dat had no pass.”²⁰

Worship and fellowship were so important to believing slaves and so meaningful when they occurred that the slaves could easily forget themselves, putting themselves at risk. “One night dar was er private meetin’ gwine on in a cabin.

De slaves was so busy singin' an' prayin,' fergot all 'bout dem old white folks. All of a sudden dar was a knock at de do'. Setch a scatterin' you neber seed."²¹

Pulpit Ministry: Twisting the Scriptures Culturally

As the ex-slaves explain it in their own words, twisted white preaching was another reason for their clandestine meetings. Lucretia Alexander of Little Rock, Arkansas, remembers the sermons the slaves endured. "The preacher came and preached to them in their quarters. He'd just say, 'Serve your masters. Don't steal your master's turkey. Don't steal your master's chickens. Don't steal your master's hogs. Don't steal your master's meat. Do whatsomeever your master tell you to do.' Same old thing all the time."²²

Alexander further explains that because of such preaching, "My father would have church in dwelling houses and they had to whisper. . . . That would be when they would want a real meetin' with some real preachin'. . . . They used to sing their songs in a whisper and pray in a whisper. There was a prayer-meeting from house to house once or twice—once or twice a week."²³

Converted slave Frank Roberson paraphrases the style of preaching to which white preachers constantly subjected slaves: "You slaves will go to heaven if you are good, but don't ever think that you will be close to your mistress and master. No! No! There will be a wall between you; but there will be holes in it that will permit you to look out and see your mistress when she passes by. If you want to sit behind this wall, you must do the language of the text 'Obey your masters.'"²⁴

Congregational Gatherings: Slipping In and Stealing Away

In order to worship freely, Christian slaves would either slip into a home or steal away to the woods. Sister Robinson

of Hampton, Virginia, pictures their effusive joy and their shrewd methods. “Wen dey had these [meetings] the men an’ women ’ud come slippin’ in fust one den ’nothah until they wuz all in. Then dey’d turn a big pot down at the do’ sill so’s ta catch the noise wen they shouted an’ hallahed. I remembah one ’oman had a big mouf. She uster put huh haid raight in the pot an’ jes yell an’ hollah an’ you couldn’t heah huh more’n three foot away.”²⁵

Numerous depictions of such clandestine worship include illustrations of praying and singing into an iron pot. Historian George Rawick believes that it was less about muffling sound and more about symbolism. It was an image of protection. God, the Potter, miraculously protected those using the pot. Rawick believes it also was a metaphor for the pot that carries life-giving water, and thus it represented God the Thirst Quencher.²⁶

Likely, it served multiple functions. The pot was a cunning human mechanism to shelter slaves from oppression. And it was also a potent spiritual portrayal of God, their shelter from the storm.

Cornelius Garner of Norfolk, Virginia, pictures slipping off to the woods, the reason for it, and the nature of slave worship. “De churches whar we went to serve God was ’Piscopal, Catholick, Presbyteriens, de same as marster’s church only we was off to usselves in a little log cabin way in de woods. De preaching jest was telling us slaves to be good to our marsters. We ain’t keer’d a bit ’bout dat stuff he was telling us ’cause we wanted to sing, pray, and serve God in our own way. You see, ’ligion needs a little motion—specially if you gwine feel de Spirret.”²⁷

One wonders how much of today’s segregated worship could be mitigated if we all worked harder to appreciate culturally different ways to experience God. Far too often we pigeonhole certain methods as “rational” and others as “emotional,” when in truth God wants us to worship him in

spirit and in truth (John 4:24). He commands us to worship him holistically—with all our heart, soul, mind, emotions, and strength (body) (Matt. 22:37).

Experiencing Together the Presence and Power of God

What actually occurred during these covert meetings to make them so fruitful? Pastor Peter Randolph provides the details we seek. “Not being allowed to hold meetings on the plantation, the slaves assemble in the swamps, out of reach of the patrols. They have an understanding among themselves as to the time and place of getting together. This is often done by the first one arriving breaking boughs from the trees, and bending them in the direction of the selected spot.”²⁸

Imagine the anticipation. On the sly, passing the word: “Psst. We’re meeting after sundown tonight. We’re going to worship and fellowship!”

Visualize the scene. They’re trekking through the woods to the swamplands of Prince George County, Virginia. “Shhh. It’s a secret,” mother undertones to daughter, with a sly smile and a knowing look. “We’re on an adventure, in the grandest adventure of them all,” father whispers to son, eyes locking and boldness oozing between them.

For them, worship and fellowship was worth any risk and was approached with tremendous expectancy. Does our commitment to and preparation for gathering together hold a candle to theirs?

Mutual Ministry: First-Century Christianity in Nineteenth-Century America

Once there, then what? Randolph explains, “Arrangements are then made for conducting the exercises. They first ask each other how they feel, the state of their minds, etc. The male members then select a certain space, in separate groups, for

their division of the meeting. Preaching in order by the brethren; then praying and singing all around, until they generally feel quite happy. The speaker usually commences by calling himself unworthy, and talks very slowly, until feeling the spirit, he grows excited, and in a short time, there fall to the ground twenty or thirty men and women under its influence."²⁹

Sound familiar? Their experience sounds like Acts 2:42, 44–47: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. . . . All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.”

In Randolph’s gathering, they *organized the organism* (“made arrangements for conducting the exercises”). That is, though valuing spontaneity and the leading of the Spirit, they also treasured purposeful planning.

They *sustained and healed* (“ask each other how they feel, the state of their minds”). Given the hardships and hard times, we might imagine quite the lengthy spiritual conversations—much different than our typical Sunday morning greetings. We say, “Hello. How are you?” and without waiting for a response, we move on to our next target. Imagine, instead, if we *really* asked how others feel—exploring one another’s emotional life—on Sunday morning, in church! Imagine also if we *truly* probed one another’s state of mind—dealing with each other’s thought life and mental well-being—on Sunday morning, in church!

They *enjoyed small group fellowship* (“then select a certain space, in separate groups, for their division of the meeting”). So much for the false accusation sometimes lobbed that small groups are a modern or postmodern invention, bringing secular sociology into the church.

They were *edified by the preached Word* (“preaching in order by the brethren”). Later we’ll see that they would enjoy

testifying by many members, exhorting by some members, and preaching by one primary, called-out leader.

They *engaged in hearing from God and talking to God* (“then praying and singing all around”). They prayed and praised, listened and spoke.

The result? They felt uplifted and experienced the presence and power of God. Together, in the midst of their suffering, they built their ark of safety.

Future Memory: Eternal Christianity in Nineteenth-Century America

But that’s not all. Randolph elaborates on the inner condition and the interpersonal consolation as they part. “The slave forgets all his suffering, except to remind others of the trials during the past week, exclaiming, ‘Thank God, I shall not live here always!’ Then they pass from one to another, shaking hands, bidding each other farewell, promising, should they meet no more on earth, to strive to meet in heaven, where all is joy, happiness and liberty. As they separate, they sing a parting hymn of praise.”³⁰

What an interesting phrase. How can people simultaneously *forget* their *suffering* and *remind* others of their *trials*? Actually, it’s quite brilliant. We can’t truly forget the evils we have suffered. Nor should we try. Instead, we should remind ourselves and others of our trials, *but* we must *remember the past while remembering the future*. “Thank God, I shall not live here always!”

What perfect “balance.” Don’t deny the past. Do dialogue and triologue (you, your friend, and God in a three-way spiritual conversation) about the past *in light of* the future—eternity, heaven.

Their grip on this world was slack—“Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. Here today. Gone tomorrow. Like a vapor. Like a fading flower and withering grass.”

Their grip on the next world was taut—"Into thy hands I commend my spirit. Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus. Maranatha."

The result? They are deeply *connected* with *one another*—passing from one another, shaking hands, bidding farewell, promising to meet again someday, somewhere. They are genuinely *content* within their *own souls*—knowing joy, happiness, and liberty, though outwardly experiencing the opposites. They are profoundly *communing* with *Christ*—singing a parting hymn of praise, certainly not for their circumstances, definitely in spite of their situations, but preeminently because of who God is.

How amazing it would be to leave every worship and fellowship service like enslaved African American believers did. If they could, given their lot in life, why can't we?

Everybody Could Be a Somebody

In the Invisible Institution, everybody could be a somebody because they could participate as the Spirit moved them.³¹ One ex-slave remembers four main movements in the Invisible Institution's symphony—preaching, praying, singing, and shouting—all of which allowed for Spirit-led participation. "They'd preach and pray and sing—shout too. I heard them git up with a powerful force of the spirit, clappin' they hands and walkin' round the place. They'd shout, 'I got the glory . . . in my soul.' I seen some powerful figurations of the spirit in them day."³²

Sharing the Word: Mentoring, Testifying, Exhorting, and Preaching

In the Invisible Institution, there were numerous levels of ministry through which believers could share the Word with one another. At a mutual lay level, the slaves shared one-on-

one spiritual friendships, exemplified in Randolph's account of asking each other about their feelings and thoughts.

African Americans also provided one-on-one mentoring before, during, and after gatherings. Older males, often called "watchmen," and older females, often called "mothers," "spiritual mothers," or dispensers of "mother wit," were important spiritual guides in the Invisible Institution. Frederick Douglass, for example, frequently sought the counsel of Uncle Charles Lawson, calling him his "spiritual father" and "chief instructor in religious matters."³³

Jane Lee, or "Aunt Jane" served as Charlotte Brooks's spiritual director. Aunt Jane first served the crucial role of witnessing concerning salvation. Brooks had no one to tell her anything about repentance until Aunt Jane talked to her. "It was dark when I left Aunt Jane; but before I left her house she prayed and sang, and it made me feel glad to hear her pray and sing. It made me think of my old Virginia home and my mother. She sang, 'Guide me, O thou great Jehovah, Pilgrim through this barren land.' . . . I finally got religion, and it was Aunt Jane's praying and singing them old Virginia hymns that helped me so much."³⁴

Aunt Jane then disciplined Brooks, secretly slipping away at night. "She would hold prayer-meeting in my house whenever she would come to see me. . . . She said people must give their hearts to God, to love him and keep his commandments; and we believed what she said."³⁵

So thorough was her discipleship that the disciple (Brooks) became like the discipler (Aunt Jane), emulating her evangelistic model. "I thank the Lord Aunt Jane Lee lived by me. She helped me to make my peace with the Lord. O, the day I was converted! It seemed to me it was a paradise here below! It looked like I wanted nothing any more. Jesus was so sweet to my soul! Aunt Jane used to sing, 'Jesus! the name that charms our fears.' That hymn just suited my case. Sometimes I felt like preaching myself. It seemed I wanted to ask every body if they loved Jesus when I first got converted."³⁶

Parents were primary mentors, especially teaching children how to live in the household of God. One South Carolina African American notes, "My daddy teach we how to sing, teach we how to shout, teach we how to go fast, teach we how to go slow. And then going to meeting, or later going to church, he'll teach we how to behave yourself when we get out to different places before we leave home."³⁷

Every believer had the opportunity, as led by the Spirit, to testify. In testifying, men and women told the stories of their encounters with God. In narrative fashion, they articulated common spiritual realities, provided proverbial wisdom for life's journey, shared advice concerning the normal problems of life, offered consolation, and, when necessary, confronted the community.³⁸

Conversion and baptism were special times for such testifying, as Isaiah Jeffries's recollection of his mother's witness bears out. "When I got to be a big boy, my Ma got religion at de Camp meeting at El-Bethel. She shouted and sung fer three days, going all over de plantation and de neighboring ones, inviting her friends to see her baptized. . . . She went around to all de people dat she had done wrong and begged dere forgiveness. She sent fer dem dat had wronged her, and told dem dat she was born again and a new woman, and dat she would forgive them."³⁹

The slaves called the next "level" of speaking ministry "exhorting." Exhorters ranged from unofficial prayer leaders on the plantation to laypeople licensed to deliver short sermons, often traveling from one plantation to another.

James Smith shares about his exhorting ministry. "Soon after I was converted I commenced holding meetings among the people, and it was not long before my fame began to spread as an exhorter. I was very zealous, so much so that I used to hold meetings all night, especially if there were any concerned about their immortal souls."⁴⁰

All of these ministries develop the premise driving *Beyond the Suffering*: Christ's commission for the church has always

emphasized the creation of an atmosphere in which mutual lay spiritual friendship and spiritual mentoring would be common features of our shared life together.

Of course, none of this suggests that it is Christ's plan for his church to be without called-out leaders—pastors, shepherds, soul physicians. The Invisible Institution maintained a remarkable equilibrium between lay and pastoral ministry.

W. E. B. Du Bois submits a compelling portrait of the African American plantation pastor. "He early appeared on the plantation and found his function as the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of wrong, and the one who rudely but picturesquely expressed the longing, disappointment, and resentment of a stolen and oppressed people. Thus, as bard, physician, judge, and priest, within the narrow limits allowed by the slave system, rose the Negro preacher, and under him the first Afro-American institution, the Negro church."⁴¹

Robert Anderson offers his firsthand account of these soul healers. "Our preachers were usually plantation folks just like the rest of us. Some man who had a little education and had been taught something about the Bible would be our preacher."⁴²

Their preaching was hope-giving. Charles Davenport remembers one particular sermon. "All us had was church meetin's in arbors out in de woods. De preachers would exhort us dat us was de chillen o' Israel in de wilderness an' de Lord done sent us to take dis land o' milk and honey."⁴³ Though living in "Egypt," African American Christians clung tenaciously to the hope of exodus.

Some of the slave preachers were illiterate but had managed to memorize large sections of Scripture.⁴⁴ A white listener named Luther recounts the spellbinding preaching on Jonah 1:6 of the black Methodist preacher Isaac Cook of South Carolina. "His description of a sinner in the ark of carnal security, afloat on the storm-tossed ocean of life, in

danger of going to the bottom, and yet asleep and unconscious of peril, was to my boyish mind indescribably awful. I left the place where that sermon was preached under an irresistible conviction that I had listened to a man of God, and that the best thing I could do for myself was to take warning, and seek for refuge in Christ as I had been so faithfully exhorted to do.”⁴⁵

These African American shepherds knew their people well. One white missionary to the slaves observed that when an African American was “in the pulpit there is a wonderful sympathy between the speaker and the audience.”⁴⁶ There was such an intense relationship between the preacher and the people that as the preacher fed the people, he fed off of their responsive engagement. Thus, even while “simply listening” to the Word, the people were active participants fulfilling an important role.

In sharing the Word, the Invisible Institution modeled for us a host of ways to engage every believer. No one came or left feeling like they were simply a spectator. Everyone came with anticipation, participated with meaning, and left encouraged that God had used them to encourage others.

Praising the Lord: Praying, Singing, and Shouting

When sharing the Word, African American believers *heard from* the Lord *through* one another. In praising the Lord, they *spoke to* the Lord *with* one another.

Praying, singing, and shouting were not items on their to-do list, nor were they lines on an “order of worship” in a church bulletin. They were opportunities to encounter God together. As with sharing the Word, praising the Lord provided the occasion for everyone to participate in the life of the congregation at a significant level of personal and communal involvement.⁴⁷

Ex-slave Alice Sewell depicts the Invisible Institution as seamlessly intertwining praying, singing, communal ministry,

and sustaining empathy. “We used to slip off in de woods in de old slave days on Sunday evening way down in de swamps to sing and pray to our own liking. We prayed for dis day of freedom. We come from four and five miles to pray together to God dat if we don’t live to see it, to please let our chillen live to see a better day and be free, so dat they can give honest and fair service to de Lord and all mankind everywhere.”⁴⁸

Sewell’s vignette contains precise theology—prayer requests were for God’s glory (“give honest and fair service to de Lord”) and for the good of others (“and all mankind everywhere”). It also speaks of personal commitment—walking five miles for prayer meeting!

The slave spirituals, as we will see in greater detail in the next chapter, were a communal enterprise. Jonas Bost of Newtown, North Carolina, reminisces about one such song. “I remember one old song we used to sing when we meet down in the woods back of the barn. . . .

Oh, Mother lets go down, lets go down, lets go
down, lets go down.
Oh, Mother lets go down, down in the valley to pray.
As I went down in the valley to pray,
Studying about that good ole way,
Who shall wear that starry crown?
Good Lord, show me the way.”⁴⁹

Most significant is his concluding memory. “Then the other part was just like that except it said ‘Father’ instead of ‘Mother,’ and then ‘Sister’ and then ‘Brother.’”⁵⁰ They mutually cared for one another as an extended family with concern for every member, whether father, mother, sister, or brother.

The slaves sometimes used the word “shouting” for the excited utterances when deep in worship. At other times it referred to the responses made to the testifier, exhorter, or preacher: “Preach it!” “Come on now, sister!” “Bring it home,

brother!” Still other times it was a technical term for the “ring shout.”

Barbara Holmes believes that “shout” is a Gullah dialect word of Afro-Arabic origin from *saut*, meaning a fervent dance.⁵¹ That would certainly fit the cultural context of the ring shout or ring dance as it was often practiced in the Invisible Institution.

The ring shout involved a singer who felt moved by the Spirit stepping into the middle of the gathering. The community of worshipers then encircled the singer, chanting, dancing, and clapping. The community provided the bass beat which the singer used to create his or her unique lyrics, appropriate for the specific situation faced by the congregation.⁵² The outer circle symbolized the interconnected, communal culture supporting the surrounded singer. Thus, together, they co-created a sustaining, healing narrative.

James Smith vividly pictures the ring shout for us. “The way in which we worshipped is almost indescribable. The singing was accompanied by a certain ecstasy of motion, clapping of hands, tossing of heads, which would continue without cessation about half an hour; one would lead off in a kind of recitative style, others joining in the chorus. The old house partook of the ecstasy; it rang with their jubilant shouts, and shook in all its joints.”⁵³

The slaves often transformed their sung narrative into a dramatic acted narrative. By combining singing, moving, dancing, and marching, the community became participants in historic deliverance events such as the children of Israel crossing the Red Sea or Joshua’s army marching around the walls of Jericho.⁵⁴

With their bodies chained in enslavement, their spirits soared like eagles through the Holy Spirit and through the communal spirit of joint worship. Though not everyone reading these words might feel comfortable worshiping in their style, each of us can ponder how, in the culture of our

worship community, we might more effectively participate in shared worship in Spirit and in truth.

Following the North Star

We follow the North Star guidance of African American church life by *combining* worship and fellowship. Too often today we pit against each other loving God and loving others. On the one hand we have the “know God, know your Bible, worship deeply” crusaders. On the other hand we find the “know one another, know mutual ministry, fellowship deeply” champions.

This all seems a tad odd, given Christ’s words in Matthew 22:35–40, in which he binds the two greatest commandments into one—love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matt. 22:40).

The “church wars” that we tolerate could end if we refused to give credence to this false dichotomy between reaching upward to God and reaching outward to one another. Neither “group” is more spiritual than the other. Our African American forebears demonstrate that true spirituality joins these two beams like a truss.

We also follow the North Star guidance of African American church life by *combining* pastoral ministry and lay ministry. Again, it is unfortunate that today we often pit people against pastors. One group seems to imply that “we don’t need trained and ordained ministers; all we need is every member a minister.” The other group seems to communicate that “a hospital visit only counts if the pastor does it.”

This all seems a little unusual, given Paul’s words in Ephesians 4:11–16, in which he connects two great commissions—pastors as equipped equippers, and laypeople as equipped ministers. Christ gave “some to be pastors and teachers, to

prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph. 4:11–12).

The animosity between people and pastors, which we too easily accept, could end if we refused to accept this false division between pastors as "player-coaches" and people as "active participants." Our African American forebears demonstrate that true ministry respects the unique callings and roles of people and pastors.

Additionally, we follow the North Star guidance of African American church life by *combining* the pulpit ministry of the Word and the personal ministry of the Word. In our times, we often pit the pastor's pulpit message against the people's over-the-backyard-fence message. One group tends to communicate, "Nothing but the pulpit!" The other group tends to convey, "Nothing but helping one another!"

This all seems a bit strange given the New Testament church's blended practice of both, seen throughout the book of Acts. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship" (Acts 2:42).

The antagonism that we allow between pulpit and pew could end if we refused to allow the false distinction between God's Word preached to the crowd by the pastor and God's Word shared in small groups and one-on-one by laypeople. Our African American forebears demonstrate the symmetry that results when we merge pulpit and pew, crowd and small group, the many and the one.

Learning Together from Our Great Cloud of Witnesses

1. "Meetings back there meant more than they do now. Then everybody's heart was in tune, and when they called on God they made heaven ring."
 - a. In what ways does your worship experience already mirror theirs?

- b. What could make this statement truer in your worship experience today?
2. Pastor William Ford demonstrated cross-cultural competency in his pulpit and personal ministry. What specific aspects of his ministry could you emulate today?
3. James Smith and John Brown pictured harmonious interracial worship.
 - a. What needs to happen for this to occur in greater quality and quantity today?
 - b. How would God be glorified and the gospel be spread if this did occur more frequently?
4. How could you step out of your comfort zone a bit to appreciate, experience, and enjoy worship in a culturally different way than what you now experience?
5. Concerning worship preparation and sacrifice:
 - a. How would you compare your preparations for worship to the preparations made by African American believers in the Invisible Institution?
 - b. How would you compare the sacrifices that you make in order to worship with the sacrifices that they made?
6. Reflect back on Randolph's description of Acts 2:42–47 Christianity.
 - a. In what ways are you already enjoying Acts 2:42–47 Christianity that beautifully blends worship and fellowship, leaders and laypeople, the pulpit ministry of the Word and the personal ministry of the Word?
 - b. How could you experience even more Acts 2:42–47 Christianity?
7. What might it look like in your life to *remember the past* (hurts) *while remembering the future* (hope)?
8. Regarding sharing the Word, what mentoring, testifying, exhorting, or preaching might God be calling

you to? What steps could you take to more boldly and effectively share God's Word?

9. Regarding praising the Lord, within your worship context and cultural setting, what might further enhance your corporate glorification of God?