

GOD...
breaks down
every form of
discrimination...

RACE, REMEMBRANCE AND THE NEW CHARGE

*A Dialogue Between Two Generations
of Black Presbyterians*

Gayraud S. Wilmore and Curtis A. Jones

Gayraud Wilmore and Curtis Jones have worked together on several projects, including the Call for Unity and Diversity initiated by the National Black Presbyterian Caucus in 1995, an attempt to broaden the discussion in the PCUSA from too narrow a focus on sexual orientation. The dialogue presented here took place at Ingleside at Rock Creek, a Presbyterian retirement community in northwest Washington, DC in January 2002.

CAJ – First, Dr. Wilmore, thank you for sharing with us your reflections on the Confession of 1967 and developments since, including the crucial role of Black liberation theology in the life of our church and beyond. It is my privilege to help the church pick up the mantle and celebrate the witness and legacy of Black Presbyterians, especially with others called to this ministry we serve. Could you begin by telling us the role you played in the development of the Confession of 1967, and what effect this document has had on you personally?

GSW – I would like to thank you also, Dr. Jones, for this opportunity to recall and shape again our response to the Confession of 1967. When I say *our* response, I am talking particularly about African-American Presbyterians because we have a particular concern with this document and a continuing interest in seeing it used effectively in the church. Let

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me note first that here at Ingleside, where my wife and I have been living for the past year, there is continued and vigorous interest in the concerns of C67 among old friends like Bryant George, Allie Latimer and Mary Jane Patterson. We "old folks" still know that ferment and revolution can come from the yeast of the gospel.

I was the only African-American on the committee. That surprised me a bit because this was a period of great sensitivity about tokenism in the church, the (Black) community and the nation. Being the only Black left me almost powerless to have much influence on the final document, but for White Presbyterian scholars to have only one African American and thus only one minority person of any kind on this committee was also a confession of their own. That is to say, the people who decided we would have a new confession did not see what was going on in the nation to be so pressing as to require a larger representation from minority groups. That was a shock because it was plain to see that it was an impossible task for one person to represent all Blacks, much less all minorities, in that august group of 10-15 experts at any meeting.

We met for a long time. It took nine years to promulgate the draft that finally became the Confession of 1967, and I was a member of that group for the whole period. The committee changed somewhat over the years; people were added and some resigned. I don't recall very many women in those meetings. The people who stand out for me are the representatives of Princeton Theological Seminary. There was Dowey, of course, the chairperson of our committee, and I must say a very able chair. There were other strong Presbyterian scholars from Princeton as well, and it is not an exaggeration to say that they dominated many of the conversations.

CAJ – Given the nature of this committee in the early 1960s, with the growing Civil Rights movement, the passage of the Civil Rights bill and the Voting Rights Act, did the church ever acknowledge the absence of

*Professor Gayraud S. Wilmore directed the Council on Church and Race (COCAR) in the United Presbyterian Church during the early 1960s before becoming the Martin Luther King, Jr. Professor of Social Ethics at Boston University. He held a similarly titled chair at Colgate Rochester Divinity School (Rochester, NY) and later became Professor of Afro-American Religious Studies at New York Theological Seminary. He retired from the Interdenominational Theological Seminary in Atlanta in 1990. While serving on the Special Committee for a Brief Statement of Faith, Wilmore authored *The Secular Relevance of the Church* (1962). Other books include, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Third Edition, 1998), *Black Presbyterians: The Heritage and The Hope* (Second Edition, 1998) and *Last Things First* (1982), a book on eschatology or the final liberation.*

racial ethnics in larger numbers or was this the generally accepted pattern?

GSW – I think that this was the generally accepted pattern. And I must say that I felt a little guilty that I did not protest the absence of other minority persons more loudly. At the time, of course, Presbyterian theological seminaries had no Black professors. I went to Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in 1959 as an assistant professor in Social Ethics. I was there 1959-1963 and then committed to Drew to do doctoral studies and later at Temple. During that time, there was a Black homiletician [Herbert King] at McCormick Seminary, but that was it. Princeton, San Francisco, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, Dubuque, and the other Presbyterian seminaries had no Black faculty. I remember Dowey and the other White scholars arguing that they would have liked to have Black scholars but there weren't any available. But there *were* Black scholars in Black theological seminaries, and at Johnson C. Smith they would have been Presbyterian. In fact, I would not have been adverse to seeing Blacks from other denominations closely aligned with the Reformed faith, like the United Church of Christ, enlisted as members of that drafting committee in order to diversify the contributions made to the work.

I participated. I was not silent. I spoke out and tried to press the issue of race at several meetings, and I must say that the members of the committee gave me the impression that they wanted to say something significant about the problem of race in America, which at that time was boiling over. As you say, the 1964 Civil Rights Bill was passed during the time we were meeting, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act was enacted. The long hot summers of urban rebellion continued from 1964 through 1967. There were riots in Watts, in Newark, in Detroit, in Rochester, NY, in Cleveland and in Chicago while we were meeting, so race was constantly in the newspaper headlines, on the radio and on TV.

I will concede, Curtis, that the members of the drafting committee were wise enough to recognize that they could not bring out a radical document that lifted up race as a primary focus and expect to have that

The Reverend Dr. Curtis A. Jones is Pastor of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, Maryland, and the current President of the National Black Presbyterian Caucus. A former union and civil rights organizer, Rev. Jones is a leader in church-based urban development and an entrepreneur in affordable housing, family life and youth training programs, and non-profit/cooperative businesses. He is a well-known speaker in the denomination and has undertaken numerous governing body assignments.

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kind of document pass through the General Assembly and the presbyteries to become an official confession of the United Presbyterian Church. So there was political caution and the sense that we had to compromise to get this document accepted by the church. At the same time we needed to make sure that the confession dealt with the most pressing political and social realities, namely race, the question of national security, the issue of poverty, and the question of sexual relationships (which I supported adding). By shaping the confession around the rock of reconciliation, I believe they made a sincere effort to declare God's will and purpose on these four major concerns that were being debated in the public square.

This said, the Confession of 1967's major thrust was to deal with the problem of scripture and the necessity of bringing the church out of an antiquated, outmoded obsession with the doctrines of infallibility and total (plenary) inspiration of the Bible, which meant that you could not question the word of God as written in its present forms. It was most important to emphasize the person of Jesus Christ as the Word of God.

So race was there; it was important, but it was not dealt with in such a way as to deepen the analysis and to prescribe methods by which reconciliation might be achieved between Black and White in America at that time. As you can see in the text, it says,

God has created the peoples of the earth to be one universal family. In reconciling love, God overcomes the barriers between sisters and brothers and breaks down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference, real or imaginary. (9.44)

That is the heart of the matter, but much more needed to be said. That was inadequate for the time in which the document was written, and it is inadequate for us today. It goes on to say that all persons need to "receive and uphold" one another in such relationships as "employment, housing, education, leisure, marriage, family, church and the exercise of political rights." Also, it claims that the Spirit of God is inclusive, judging those who exclude in any way, but that is moving away from the really critical question.

That question was the faithlessness of the Presbyterian Church in the face of the demonic power of racism in society and in the White church in America. That is the real heart of the issue. That confession or admission was not made. We did not say that the Presbyterian Church is guilty of racism and that this racism must be extirpated from the church

in ways that could be explicated, if not in this document, then somewhere else.

Now I don't want to sound bitter about this because I am not. I went to those working sessions two or three times a year and was as affable as anybody else. I would shake hands with the brothers and sisters, sit down, have coffee and work with them on various parts of the documents. We did a lot of writing and exchanging of notes, and Ed Dowey would take them home and revise. We would come back to another meeting and continue working. This went on for more than seven years. We worked for a long time, but it soon became clear to me, as one voice in the wilderness, as one vote, that I could not convince the brothers and sisters that race should be taken more seriously and given a larger place in the document.

CAJ – Gay, let me interject something if I may. Princeton Seminary was deeply steeped in Barthian theology at that time, and even when I got my M.Div. there in the late 70s. To me, Barth approaches race on a surface level, as did most majority theologians of his time. I believe – to use your words – that the confession did not deal with race in a way that deepened the analysis. Had they chosen to deepen the analysis, where might they have gone and how might they have strengthened this document?

GSW – I am glad you asked that question because that leads to one of the most important things I want to say. In 1984, a group of Black theologians representing twelve denominations promulgated a statement called “A Common Confession of the Apostolic Faith,” published in *Black Witness to the Apostolic Faith*. In this statement, for which I admit having been a guiding hand, these African-American theologians and church leaders looked at the question of “the one holy catholic and apostolic church” through an in-depth analysis of Black conditions in America.

As Black people, we have a different experience of the unity, apostolicity, and catholicity of the church that contributes to an enriched ecclesiology for all Christians. In that “Common Confession” you will see possibilities overlooked in C67 for deepening the dialogue between Whites and Blacks, possibilities still missed in much multicultural dialogue today.

The theme of reconciliation itself is an apt New Testament theme for talking about race, national security, poverty, and male-female relation-

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ships, but I must contend that “reconciliation” is inadequate for dealing with racial injustice and ethnic hatred. Liberation was the major thrust of the Black Church in those years, and liberation was a synonym for reconciliation in that period. It should have been lifted up as one of the major revisions of the churches’ concern. Liberation without reconciliation is stained, and reconciliation without liberation is empty. That was the point I tried to make in those meetings, in the hallways, around the coffee table. We simply cannot have reconciliation without liberation.

CAJ – Dr. Wilmore, you take me back to an earlier question and comment. If this document emerged in the context of the Civil Rights Movement and the birthing of the liberation theology and Black Power movements, yet does not address the most serious domestic challenges, what then is the significance of the document? I heard someone once describe Princeton as being, metaphorically, where the church is, but not where the church needs to go or become. Is this still a Princeton confession?

GSW – C67 is important historically and well rooted in Calvinism and its then contemporary expressions, but it is not where we ought to be at the present time. I agree with you about Princeton at that time. My most intimate association with Princeton faculty then was with Charles West. I taught one of his summer courses. He was a missionary who understood, as many missionaries do, the importance of diversity within the church, and the importance of the struggle for justice and liberation in the Third World. He saw us as African Americans as part of that Third World struggle. With all respect to Dr. Hendry, an older Scotsman and Princeton expert on the Westminster Confession, I don’t think either the faculty or the C67 committee was tuned in to the shaking of the foundations of the American society and the American church that was happening between 1963 and 1967. 1963 was the turning point with the March on Washington, the murder of Medgar Evers, and the bombing of the Birmingham church...

CAJ – In your work, drawing on George Kelsey, you argue that racism is diametrically opposed to Christianity. Can you say more about that?

GSW – Kelsey was my teacher at Drew and his book, *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man*, greatly influenced my thinking. He called racism a form of religion and therefore an idolatry diametrically opposed to Christianity because it does not respect the fundamental truth that God has created all human beings in God’s own image and

that they are equal in God's sight. The attack on racism that Kelsey chose, and I think rightly, was a theological one, which said that racism is a false religion, an apostasy fundamentally opposed to Christian doctrine. This was not said in the Confession of 1967 quite so radically, though it could have been.

The World Council of Churches' consultation that I chaired in Europe on Racism in Theology and Theology Against Racism might also be unearthed to deepen this point, although it was left out of the report at the Stravanger meeting of the WCC's Faith and Order Commission. I raised the question there as to why it was left out. Today I believe it was left out because it was considered too radical an indictment of Christianity or Christianity in the West, or of authoritative WCC documents particularly. It could not be sent to the member communions. Again, I was the only Black person representing the Presbyterian Church on the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, and I had somewhat the same experience of isolation there.

CAJ – If part of your assessment of the Confession of 1967 is that they failed to go far enough in their assessment and acknowledgement of the implications of racism, what then can be said about Black Presbyterians today and their refusal to acknowledge their own historical documents and to use the legacy that has been passed on to them?

GSW – Well I think that we as Black Presbyterians are guilty of ignoring the rich deposit of Black theology and the emphasis on liberation in the writings of our own pastors and scholars. Of course, as President of the National Black Presbyterian Caucus, you know this better than I. We have not educated our constituency properly so that they understand the ways in which we have struggled with racism over the years. We were organized to do something about racism before the Civil War. We worked with Black Congregational clergy in the late 1850's, so I think that kind of collaboration is one of the important things we need to be about today.

In the period before the 1983 merger [to create the PCUSA], Black Presbyterians United brought together thinking people within our church to work on a theological statement reviewing the history and the struggle. If you look in *Perspective* and some of the other literature of the Caucus you will find some good ideas for action today. How much attention is this material getting in the congregations? I don't know, and I'm not aware that study guides were written to help the churches. The

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closest we came was the "New Wine" document that had some important elements that could have been used in leading our people into theological and ethical discourse on the question of Black Power and Liberation. So this is a job that remains to be done during this 21st century: to enliven and enrich Christian Education in Black congregations with the kind of theological content that will inspire them to take more seriously our history and present thinking about racism and other problems of the poor.

CAJ – Is this an issue of fear, ignorance or apostasy, whereby Black pastors and even scholars have been exposed to theological instruments and documents and then have failed to teach what they have learned in their congregational settings?

GSW – I think it is also a function of our economic condition. As we have moved into the middle class as a "Black bourgeoisie" (Frazier's phrase), many of us are no longer sensitive to the victimization of Black people. We ourselves are no longer poor, we Black Presbyterians. We (mainline) Black Christians generally are better off these days, and few of us remember when we didn't have a pair of shoes or a decent house or a job. So I think that our current economic situation has blinded us to continuing injustice in the central cities.

What is called for now is the development of a theological sensibility that deals with the reality of being middle class and yet radical disciples of Jesus Christ. We are not going to permit ourselves to go back to abject poverty or a lower class status. We're not going back to being ill-educated and culturally deprived. So the question becomes what kind of theology and what kind of church order is called for to galvanize Black people who are middle class, who have middle class sensibilities and responsibilities that they are presently enjoying in their congregations? We don't have an answer to that question yet.

CAJ – Gibson Winter talked about the middle class captivity of the church and Ella Mitchell has written on the African-American middle class captivity. Has the seduction of class relationships become, like racism, so great a force as to be a false religion as well? I say this, Gay, in light of the fact that Judaism was formed as a result of a God who heard the cries of the Hebrews and then acted decisively to offer both emancipation and redemption. In Christianity, likewise, the Word became incarnate in the form of God-born-in-a-stable, born homeless, on the road so to speak, and then Jesus preaches that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him. What has happened in the life of the Presbyterian

Church as a whole, as well as in the life of Black Presbyterians you describe so well in *Heritage and Hope*, now that we are partly in this middle class of the mainstream culture? What has happened to compromise that voice of liberation that was missing in the Confession of 1967 and is still missing in our pulpits today?

GSW – That is a heavy question. That we also have become oblivious to the cries of the poor and the suffering of people around the world is partly a matter of class. We sometimes identify with a class that in mainstream culture traditionally does not think of itself as a solution to the problems of economics and politics that are so important to poor people in the cities and rural areas. Ethically, you have got to find a way to help our people realize that with their new affluence comes new responsibilities and obligations. “To whom much is given, much shall be required.” We have been saying that for years to White folks. We *now* need to say that to ourselves. We need to marshal our people to make contact again with the poor in those areas that are depressed and that harbor crime and misery to lift the level of quality of life for all people and not just for ourselves and our families.

That is the challenge for Black Presbyterians today, and that is the challenge for the Presbyterian Church. Maybe it is time now for a new Confession of Faith, one that would not only analyze in depth the new situation in which we find ourselves, facing a world of great poverty and great suffering, but also help us as African-American Presbyterians to recognize that we have a new charge, a new calling or vocation that will authenticate our true faith as Christians and not contradict it.

There are more than 150 Reformed confessions floating around, from all over the world, so there is no reason why Black Presbyterians could not promulgate a Confession of Faith of their own and commend it to the church as a model of what one of its minority groups feels is the way we must express our common faith today to one another and to the world.

CAJ – So much has been written and discussed in relationship to multiculturalism, pluralism, and inclusiveness. How can one be authentically Black and yet operate within a religious and Christian setting that addresses the issues of reconciliation?

GSW – That is a question that I have pondered for many years as one who has been active in the movement for cultural identity as African-American Christians. I have often wondered whether we had come to a point where we had so exaggarated our ethnic identity as Black people

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that we no longer had room for reconciling with other ethnic groups and making ourselves part of the totality of humankind. I don't think we have come to that place yet, but there is that danger.

There is always the risk that when we talk about ethnicity we tend to reduce concerns and emphases dealing with humanity as a whole. We, in other words, threaten to depreciate the unity of humankind by talking about the unity of its diverse parts. Yet I think we have to run that risk, for the essence of humanity, or one essential characteristic of humanity, is its diversity. We are all children of one God, bringing to the table our distinctive histories and cultures, which together enrich the totality of the human family. Just as each of my children is an individual person, with his or her own motives, motivations, instincts, impulses and contributions to make to the family, so do we as members of the human family, as ethnic groups and cultural groups (which is really the meaning of ethnicity in this context) have our distinctive contributions to make out of our history and traditions to the totality of the human family. So I think that we have to talk about both all the time, emphasize both. We have to run the risk of not stressing the general enough by talking about particularities, but we must also recognize the necessity of stressing particularities and the importance of our special experiences and gifts in order to make unity of the whole real and fruitful.

In conclusion, I would say that our earliest intimations leading to a Black theology of liberation made us more conscious of the complexities of race, class and culture in God's plan for creation. It made us more aware of the importance of the religion of the folk. It is in this direction that we must look for a solution to the problems besetting the church today.


Let me quote from a letter I sent to *The New York Times* (printed September 14, 1984). It reviews some of the history since 1967 and grounds our struggle in the spirituality of the people rather than in Marxism or Capitalism.

In Black liberation theology – which came into print before the Latin American version with ... Albert B. Cleage's *The Black Messiah* in 1968 and James H. Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* in 1969 – a cultural analysis that focused on endemic White racism in the West receives equal emphasis with social analysis ...

This way of looking at Black oppression suggests an ethno-class configuration in North America, the Caribbean and southern Africa not

accounted for solely by the ... (class/power) ... theory that characterizes liberation theology in Latin America. It represents a more psycho-historical perspective, and it is less utopian and more prepared for a protracted struggle to transform our society from within. It is not persuaded that either capitalism or socialism can get rid of racism.

...Afro-American religious thought rests upon due consideration of the way race prejudice can combine with and sometimes override economic rationality – as in sectors of the American labor movement. But Black theology also gives more attention to the capacity of certain forms of “folk religion” to engender an aggressive ethnic consciousness and radical activism while remaining loyal to “Bible-centered, born-again” faith traditions which depend more upon a sense of cultural vocation and spirituality than upon theological dogma or “scientific” analysis. Hence the success of Dr. King in mobilizing a religio-political movement in the Black community grounded in the “tough-headed, tender-hearted” ethics of Jesus, mainly non-Marxist, nonviolent and committed to the use of Black power in the political process...

Since those words were written, we have rejoiced in the liberation of Southern Africa and continued progress in North America, if not in Latin America, the Middle East and parts of Asia. But to quote the Confession of 1967, “the church [*still*] labors for the abolition of all racial discrimination and ministers to those injured by it” (9.44). But until that includes the church of the people, the church of the poor and the oppressed, we will labor in vain. That’s why I say that we may now need a new and more inclusive confession for the Presbyterian Church (USA). 

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