

# What can we learn about the texture of Christian ethics by observing how African American congregations have historically dealt with issues related to sexuality?

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It should be clear to anyone who keeps up with such things that the majority of African American Christians, if asked to vote yea or nay tomorrow on the ordination of lesbian and gay people to the ministry or to important lay offices, would vote nay. Most Blacks in all-Black denominations (comprising about 80% of all African-descended Christians in the U.S.) and most (but perhaps a smaller percentage) in predominantly white denominations are strangely traditional and almost puritanical when it comes to imposing formal, even stringent, moral and ethical standards upon those who are presumed to be emissaries of Jesus Christ in his church.

I consider my mother and father, both deceased, and most of my relatives of their and my generation (strong Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists), fairly typical in this respect. Mother and Dad were strong on civil rights and justice for the poor, the incarcerated and disabled; passionately concerned about equal and non-segregated public education; supporters of soldiers, sailors, and marines, but wary about wars; committed to legislation for welfare mothers, full employment, controlled abortion, open and affordable housing, the prudent regulation of laissez faire capitalism, government sponsorship of universal medical care, health insurance and social security. But they were also believers in an inerrant Bible that, to all intents and purposes, condemned the sexual behavior of lesbians, gays, bi-sexual, and transgendered persons – albeit, God love them all!

That is the kind of Christianity some of us assimilated from the right wing of the Great Awakenings of the 19th century. That's what the white Baptists and Methodists of the South, the Quakers from Pennsylvania, and the doughty Congregational and Presbyterian

*From the book*

**Frequently Asked Questions About Sexuality, The Bible, and The Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues**

A collection of essays considering the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in church life and leadership.

missionaries from New England and Ohio taught us in the church-sponsored schools and mission stations below the Mason-Dixon Line. We learned that cleanliness was next to Godliness, and that sex was dirty – even between a married man and woman – so you know what it had to be between people of the same gender! Our preachers found the inerrant proof-texts in the big pulpit Bible and the congregation nodded its heads and said, “Amen, Reverend. Ain’t that the truth!”

Nevertheless I will always admire those courageous white women and men who followed the Union army and gathered the newly freed slaves into make-shift congregations, one-room school houses, boarding schools, and who were frequently members of the faculties of our first fledgling colleges and universities. They taught us more than reading, writing, and arithmetic. They taught us middle-class manners and morals. Many an awkward and timid young Black boy or girl caught a glimpse of a wonderful life as a freeborn, full-fledged American citizen. Some of these young people became eager, enterprising migrants to the cities of the South and North because of the band of Northern missionaries and

teachers, both white and Black, who told the white population of the former Confederacy what Joseph told a man in Shechem: “I am seeking my brothers.”

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But for all the good they did, they also messed us up. They overlaid the pragmatic spirituality of our African inheritance with the unctuous, privatistic, feel-good, and moralistic religiosity of an evangelical Protestantism that the missionaries themselves didn’t practice. They made us feel guilty about sex. They loaded us with biblical laws and ordinances, and conventional Anglo-Saxon mores that they themselves abrogated whenever it suited them. Throughout the 20th century some of our boldest and brightest religious

leaders sought to free us from bibliolatrous piety and helped some of us to adopt a faith that defined and sanctified our experience of a continuous struggle for humanity in the face of unremitting dehumanization and indignity.

But the effort has borne little fruit thus far. What is called the Black Church in America is, for the most part, a hyper-conservative institution when it comes to human sexuality and recognition of the amazing grace and responsible freedom in the bedroom that all Christians have been given in Jesus Christ.

However, this conservatism of the mainline Black churches, and their sisters and brothers who remained in the predominantly white denominations, is nuanced in some peculiar ways that even Black scholars are aware of but do not fully comprehend. The churches made notable exceptions when communal values overrode moralistic constraints. Here, a gay assistant pastor or choir director was cherished and people kept their thoughts to themselves, their mouths shut, and turned their heads so as not to see. There, an old maid lesbian Sunday School teacher and the young college girl who lodged with her during the school year were discreetly ignored if they made no open display of affection. Here, a preacher who was known to be sleeping with a woman leader in the congregation was quietly persuaded by a group of husbands to mend his ways or give up the church. There, a bisexual artist or musician who was suspected of promiscuity with men and women was spared from having the matter dragged into public view. Rather than ruin the lives of everyone involved and shame the community, the church chose to quietly remove him from his position and recommended that

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he seek private counseling. Different cases were resolved in different ways. The point is that Black churches have many times let communal values override moralistic legalism.

This kind of finely discriminated and nuanced observance of Biblical literalism regarding matters of sexual impropriety points to a deep-lying humanism, and even pragmatism, in African American religion. To those on the outside it may smack of hypocrisy (and often it can be explained in no other way), but I think more frequently it shows that in the windy interstices of a rigid structure of conservative Christian ethics, built up over years of Bible-

thumping sermons on Sunday mornings, sawdust trail revivals, and unrelenting prayer bands and evangelistic efforts of all kinds, there is a common sense and unsanctimonious realism in the faith of African Americans that tends toward the shalom of the community, toward forgiveness, toward inclusivity and prudential tolerance.

That is what Black liberation theology, which flourished in the latter days of the civil rights movement and came to full throttle with the rise of Black Power between 1964 and 1970, attempted to reinstate and unleash as a counterpoint to the influence of white theology in the institutional Black churches. The effort has not been abandoned. Today more Black clergy are graduating from seminaries where they have learned that justice, liberation, and inclusiveness are at the core of the

gospel and the Black religious experience. Large national gatherings of Black ministers, unencumbered by ecclesiastical certification and oversight – like the annual Hampton, VA pastors’ conference and the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Pastors and Lay Convocations of the past three years – are beginning to listen to Black biblical scholars and theologians. Today a new breed of scholars in religion are cautiously pressing for an orthodoxy that avoids consigning the LGBT community to hell. They are reminding Black church members to “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. . . ” (Deut. 5:15).

Nevertheless, the reinterpretation of human sexuality in the Black church moves slowly against the currents of Protestant fundamentalism. But the commitment to cultural autonomy and radical freedom in Christ espoused by 20th-century Black liberation and womanist theologians reinforces the ethos of a Black Christianity which naturally resists any form of orthodoxy connected to exclusivity and racism while still clinging to many traditional values. There is nothing particularly Black about this theological and ethical inconsistency, but it at least gives the lie to the allegation that born-again African Americans are inflexible Bible-idolaters and wholly bound to an outmoded orthodoxy. We have introduced some significant changes to American churches and to this society in the past, and may again in the future.

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