



Working to Connect Religion, Black Bodies, and Sexuality: What Black Churches Should Know, Part Two

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As part one of this essay makes clear, black churches face a crisis, a time in their history that will either solidify their importance within the collective life of African Americans, or render them irrelevant. In this second installment, we wrestle with black churches and sexuality.

The body plagues black Christianity and black churches on a variety of fronts, and this revolves around the spiritual life black Christians seek and the needs and wants of their physical bodies. Most troubling for black churches is the body as related to issues of sex and sexuality. Put differently, a significant challenge for black churches concerns learning to appreciate (rather than reject) black bodies as a source for pleasure and as defined in part through their experience of the erotic dimensions of human life and human relationships.

But before moving on, a note of clarification is necessary: Sex and sexuality are not the same. The former can be understood as the differentiation of sex organs (male or female for example) or various acts of intimacy. The latter involves how people experience themselves or know themselves through their erotic desire. The former, sex, involves a set of actions and the latter, sexuality, means how bodies are experienced through physical desire.

What Bodies Do

We are sexual. We express our connections to others and ourselves in ways that are sensual and erotic. We desire these connections, and this isn't restricted to procreation. We express our regard, our 'belonging' together, through sexual contact. For Christians, even the scriptures speak to physical desire as part of the human make-up, part of how we relate to each other. And these connections, with the "Song of Songs" as an example, are celebrated within the Bible.

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine. Because of the savour of thy good ointments thy name is as ointment poured forth, therefore do the virgins love thee. Draw me, we will run after thee: the king hath brought me into his chambers: we will be glad and rejoice in thee, we will remember thy love more than wine: the upright love thee (Song of Solomon 1:2-4).

However, the biblical message is mixed in that there are also ways in which it troubles physical intimacy. Scripture, social norms, and theology that resulted in deep suspicion concerning bodies also impacts what many black Christians think about what the body experiences, in this case as experience revolves around sex and sexuality.

And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.

But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved) (Ephesians 2:2-5).

As if the cultural world of the authors of the Bible and that of African Americans are identical, black churches invoke scriptural regulations on sex. But even this is done in a selective way, for example The Leviticus codes (Leviticus 1-27) are not enforced, and the embrace of sexual activity outside marriage found in the Hebrew Bible is ignored. The Book of Leviticus (Leviticus codes) does not prohibit sex outside marriage (Leviticus 18). Abraham is promised a son and this takes place through sex with Hagar, a servant. This is not the marriage context endorsed by black churches; yet, Abraham's sexual relationship outside marriage is not condemned in the Bible and only really situationally condemned in black churches. Sex becomes problematic in the Hebrew Bible to the extent it destroys the community of the chosen (e.g., incest) by preventing group solidarity. However, premarital sex isn't listed as one of the things that resulted in a destruction of community. No, I am not saying that there are not legitimate reasons for teaching and preaching in behalf of marital fidelity and fidelity in all relationships. Let's just make sure that our scriptural exegesis and proclamation is correct and consistent.

In black churches favor is given to the more restrictive code as outlined in the New Testament. The assumed imminence of Christ's return and the utility of complete devotion to preparation for the immediate return found in the New Testament is given sway over the pleasuring of physical bodies in a time with a very different sense of Christ's return. In separating followers of Christ from the world, key New Testament figures also separate Christians from their bodies and deny sensitivity to the sexual pleasures these bodies give and receive. For instance, restricting sexual activity to marriage, during a period of world history when marriages occurred at a younger age, doesn't jibe with the contemporary moment when people often wait to marry (if they marry at all) for a variety of reasons. Nonetheless, churches tend to theologically articulate and scripturally justify sex restrictions that are not mindful of the details of our contemporary world.

For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want (Galatians 5:17).

Hence there is in place a moral code regarding sex drawn from a different cultural world, yet applied without thought to today. Produced through this moral code is deep guilt and decreased capacity for proper relationships.

For this is the will of God, *even* your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: that every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honor; not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God: that no *man* go beyond and defraud his brother in *any* matter: because that the Lord *is* the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified. For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness (Thessalonians 4: 3-7).

A bad moral code is tied to a bad understanding of sexual ethics, one that does not allow for open conversation and open recognition that we are sexual beings. Rather than promoting healthy sexual relationships too many black churches, through their theologies and ethics, produce warped understandings and body-denying practices.

Ordering What Bodies Do

Proper sexual relationships within the black church context are assumed to take place within the context of marriage, and hence have only to do with a man and a woman. Such restrictions at best have resulted in misunderstandings concerning the various ways in which the erotic is experienced. At worse, it has produced homophobia. Interpreting scripture in restrictive ways, many black churches argue that homosexuality runs contrary to God's will and the natural order of life. That is, for example, they interpret the story of Sodom and Gomorrah as a critique of sexual practices as opposed to the more reasonable assessment that it involves a critique of a lack of hospitality toward the stranger. They employ in a selective fashion Hebrew Bible codes concerning homosexuality, and they fixate on a limited number of New Testament texts that privilege heterosexual activity.

Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-10 KJV).

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-10 NRSV).

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error (Romans 1:26-27 NRSV).

The consequence of this homophobia is a restricted sense of community. Gays and lesbians in churches are forced to dislike their bodies and what their bodies love in order to secure 'salvation'. They must sit in silence and listen to condemnation from pulpits, developing a type of duality – loving their souls and despising their bodies. Homophobia in black churches destroys lives. It labels as "sinners" some members of churches because of their sexual

orientation that is a part of who they were created to be by God. The stigma and verbal abuse associated with homophobia can result in tragedy such as suicide. It forces people to embrace self-hate, and in the process destroys connections to family and friends.

Too many black churches ignore the hard questions concerning sex and sexuality. Black churches should not think it necessary to consider sex sinful, and certain relationships ‘unnatural’. This attitude restricts black churches and their work on issues of oppressions by making churches guilty of oppression within their own ranks. If black churches fear or at worse despise what the body is and what it does, they cannot really be concerned with safeguarding African Americans against abuse. If they cannot safeguard African Americans from abuse, their purpose and usefulness is seriously called into question.

Thinking Anew

Rather than restrictive readings of the Bible and rather than theological pronouncements devoid of sensitivity to our historical moment, black churches should draw from scripture general lessons of conduct that speak to a need to forge nurturing relationships that allow people to be all they can be as individuals and within the context of healthy communities. The takeaway from scripture should in fact be the demand for justice and love as the bases of life. This framing of the purpose and function of black churches can allow them to recognize the diversity of life, the diversity of experience, and the multitude of ways in which our bodies engage others and the world.

This approach requires a willingness to take seriously African American experience as the litmus test – the lens through which scripture and other source materials are viewed and interpreted. Or, as theologian (and African Methodist Episcopal Church minister) James H. Cone has remarked, “Truth is experience and experience is truth.” This may be difficult for some in that such a stance runs contrary to the more conservative social and theological tendencies of black churches. While some will continue to advance positions that use the pulpit as a place to speak a damaging and life destroying word, black churches actually have little choice but to give greater care to these issues. If they are to be relevant, to speak a liberating word to the current world, the black church must correct its perspective on black bodies and issues of sex/sexuality. If they don’t move in this direction, anything resembling relevance is brought into question. *Or*, if they don’t move in this direction, it will be a clear sign that black churches cannot help African Americans live full and rich lives.

This is not to say black churches lose their ability to critique, to point out shortcomings inconsistent with the essence of the Christian faith. They maintain this ability, but do so through a different sense of what is normative or acceptable: giving priority to justice for all, and love-infused spiritual development consistent with some version of what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., referenced as the “somebodyness” we all share.

There is room for this change, even when scripture is considered a central point of self-understanding for black churches. These churches need only exercise with respect to sex and sexual orientation the same mode of interpretation used with respect to issues of race and racism. New Testament and Hebrew Bible assumptions of slavery as a social reality were not allowed to rule the day concerning African Americans. How many black churches used scripture in support of slavery and race-based oppression of African Americans as opposed to re-interpreting scripture in support of their freedom? How many African American churches have reinterpreted scripture to allow women to teach and preach? The same liberation centered interpretation used to advance anti-racism and anti-sexism thought and action

should be brought to bear on the destruction of homophobia and other forms of oppression that damage African American life.