

Sixth Annual Sam Sharpe Lecture
Held on Saturday, October 7, 2017
at the Perry Rise Baptist Church, London, England.

Topic: Members of one Another: Fleeting Illusion or Faithful Pursuit

Preamble

One hundred and eighty-five years ago, on May 23, 1832, the man in whose name and memory this lecture is named was hanged in St. James, Jamaica. He was murdered by the State for his role in what was viewed as a bloody uprising. For Jamaicans, however, Sharpe is a National Hero and Universal Icon of resistance and courage. His spirit and legacy are alive and inspirational among us today as we remember his conviction to defy the powers of evil, choosing 'rather to die on yonder gallows than live in slavery'! I am deeply honoured therefore to be associated with this lecture series and, doubly so, to have been asked to share some thoughts on the occasion of the sixth staging.

It ought to be stated from the outset that being tasked with this assignment is more linked to my office and role as General Secretary of the Jamaica Baptist Union than any alignment of my ability and competence with the stellar list of scholars who have delivered the previous five lectures. Even moreso, however, it is linked to the fact that this year marks the tenth anniversary of the Swanick Apology for Slavery and the Slave Trade offered by British Baptists in November 2007. I have so dubbed it because of where it took place, Swanick (Derbyshire), in Britain.

A watershed moment by any measure, the Apology has led to a kind of renaissance of the relationship between Jamaican and British Baptists...a relationship that was officially forged in 1814 when the first British clergy arrived on February 23. Additionally, the decision to personally (on a visit from May 22-29, 2008) deliver the apology on the soil which had soaked up so much of the blood, sweat and tears of our forebears was deemed a positive gesture of sincerity. Allow me to say that our time together following those events has led some of us to believe that the process leading up to, as well as the

apology itself, may ultimately have its most lasting impact on the way British Baptists organize themselves for ongoing mission.

In keeping with that viewpoint this lecture will seek to highlight some perspectives arising from my reflections on our journey thus far. The topic I have chosen 'Members One of Another: Fleeting Illusion or Faithful Pursuit' is meant to be a divine plumb line against which to reflect on the journey. Based on Romans 12:5, these words of the Apostle Paul set a tone, offer an outlook and imply an imperative which are relevant to whether, as Church, we are reflecting a particular Gospel non-negotiable. The words suggest [within their scope] that **the church in any authentic expression of its life, ought to be an integrated, non-discriminatory community of believers with a shared commitment to Christ Jesus and empowered by the Spirit to serve a common cause.** This common cause goes beyond its own self-nurturing but embraces a definitive missional purpose.

Let me say one more thing before proceeding and that is I wish for us all to remember that I speak as one whose experience has been shaped by a historical context of the underside or other-side of mission as some would say – that is a mission-field with all that this implies. I live, move and have my being in a country that knows first-hand the full implications of chattel slavery, an extended period of colonial rule after slavery and a post-colonial existence with continuing legacies of colonialism that remain alive in our memory and continue to be a shaping influence in our daily life.

Introduction

I remember exactly where I was when I received news of the historic Swanick Apology. I was in Trinidad & Tobago participating in a week of revival meetings when David Kerrigan, then Director of International Mission at the Baptist Missionary Society, sent me an email sharing what had happened. Perhaps if it were today I would have dismissed it as fake news but what I can say is that several feelings gripped me as I read that email. There were feelings of relief, joy, disappointment, anger, scepticism - I could go on and on.

The Swanick Apology was offered a little under five months after some Jamaicans, along with other members of the worldwide Baptist Family, gathered for a Service of Memory and Reconciliation at the Elmira Slave Castle in Accra, Ghana and witnessed members of the BUGB contingent refuse to join with others in apologizing for their role in slavery and the slave trade;

The Swanick Apology was offered some seven months after the May 2007 address of then JBU President Karl Henlin at the BUGB Assembly in Brighton, where he repeated a call made by the Executive of the Jamaica Baptist Union for the British Baptist Church to offer an apology for slavery and the slave trade...it may be of interest to note that Henlin in a report to the JBU stated as follows: 'that call elicited various kinds of responses and seemed to have struck a nerve especially among black Baptists...it was obvious that the response to the call (would) have serious implications for the ongoing relationships between black and white Baptists...';

The Swanick Apology was offered ten years after then JBU General Secretary, Trevor Edwards, wrote urging British Baptists to make clear and unequivocal statements of 'repentance of the atrocities of chattel slavery, repentance of the acts committed by her foreparents in the name of development and progress; repentance of the acts of exploitation, economic and racial injustice'; he went further to implore British Baptists to 'call upon the State to make restoration of some of the wealth taken from the countries which were former colonies...this restoration should be made through debt cancellation, aid without strings and cessation of arms sale to repressive dictatorial regimes'.

So you might better understand why I and several others experienced such a wave of emotions when the Apology was finally made. Let me hasten to say however that after prayerful consideration we unreservedly accepted the Apology. We were at one with BWA General Secretary, Neville Callam, who stated that 'we know the joy and the blessing of forgiveness. With this, true healing is possible and liberation becomes the common gain of everyone involved'.

The question now is, has the Apology resulted in an authentic expression of an integrated and non-discriminatory community of believers?

Co-Workers but not Co-Equals

The JBU & BUGB/BMS story is well documented. We know that it began when George Liele and Moses Baker, early pioneers of Baptist witness, in Jamaica invited the newly formed Baptist Missionary Society of London to come and share in their missionary endeavours. By then Baptist witness was already well established in Jamaica and hundreds of enslaved people had already accepted the Christian faith.

It is abundantly clear that British Baptists didn't come as initiators of the work but in response to a cry for help in organizing the ministry. In spite of this, much to the shame of Jamaican Baptists, it was only in 1983 when we celebrated our bicentenary that attention began to be given to the pioneering work of Liele. Up to this time, the point of departure for viewing the beginning of Baptist witness in Jamaica was 1814 the arrival of John Rowe the first missionary from the BMS.

One need not think too hard to discern what may have accounted for this!

Let no one think that I am inviting any devaluation of the collaboration between JBU and British Baptists. On the contrary, I am keenly aware and appreciative of the many blessings God has bestowed on our journey together. In tandem with our British partners, by the end of the 19th century Baptist witness was in every parish and many of our pastors were Jamaicans trained at Calabar Theological College; by the middle of the 20th century, through the Jamaica Baptist Missionary Society (JBMS) and BMS, Jamaican and British Baptists had spread the Good News to other Caribbean islands and Central America.

Education was a significant feature of our collaboration especially theological, early childhood and secondary, which was emphasized over the years. This focus was evident from very early in the relationship as the Calabar Theological College and Normal School was established in 1843 in Rio Bueno, Trelawny to train men for ministry and for missionary work in Africa and the Caribbean. Calabar Theological College existed until 1965/1966 when it joined in an ecumenical venture now known as the United Theological College of the West Indies.

Permit me special mention of another product of our working together, namely, the Calabar High School for Boys which opened its doors on September 12, 1912. It was born out of a pressing need, at the time, to provide sound secondary education for the sons of Baptist Ministers. It is a hitherto unchallenged view that Calabar High School has produced more persons in the full-time Christian ministry than any other high school in Jamaica. Certainly within the JBU no single school has provided more Presidents (Devon Dick, Stephen Jennings and Karl Henlin) not to mention a General Secretary (Karl Johnson), and many other ministers.

Our cooperation added voice and opposition to the monstrosity of chattel slavery. As Baptists, we were at the forefront of the fight to abolish slavery and to affirm the dignity and development of the African through the establishment of communities of empowerment. While there were those who obeyed the caution from Britain not to involve themselves in 'domestic matters', we celebrate the ones who could not quench the fire of justice that burned within them and played their part in confronting the forces of evil.

The uncomfortable truth however is that with all the positives we have recognized we have to admit that this association did not mean that we were viewed as equals! Understandably the missionaries came as people already culturally conditioned and steeped in the geo-political climate of the day.

Sadly, the Church on its missionary enterprise, and even afterwards, played a prominent legitimating and sanctioning role in the status quo established and operated by the imperial and colonial powers. This included not only preaching and teaching aimed at inducing acceptance, by enslaved persons and descendants of enslaved persons, of their status under domination as a religious requirement but also affirming and imposing cultural offerings and social structures that further defined their subject status. The evidence and consequences of this are very well known as an integral part of the history and legacy of colonial and post-colonial societies.

Of course all of this took place with the supposedly good and sincere intention of evangelizing the pagan peoples. It was however at the same time an exercise which included uncritical collaboration in expansion and consolidation enterprise of the

Imperial powers, an evangelizing, civilizing and colonizing mission all in one. This kind of connection of Church and imperial power in shared movement and purpose has had a continuing history even in changing times and in changing forms but with the same impact.

Whereas the role of the Christian religion seemed ostensibly to have been in service of the Imperial and Colonial powers as much as anything else it is not all that can be attributed to it. There were those who had been inspired differently by their religious conviction. They understood their faith-commitment from a different perspective. Even though it has not come out as clearly as it ought to have done in many instances this other perspective originated with the victims of Imperialism and Colonialism. They saw for themselves that the legitimizing teachings they were receiving, aimed at justifying their condition, did not fit their experience and understanding of God.

Yes, there were and are those who read the bible differently and like Sam Sharpe, Paul Bogle, Martin Luther King Jr, Desmond Tutu and many others we refuse to be defined as 'less than'.

Are we members one of another? Is this vision a fleeting illusion or faithful pursuit?

Different Times but Same Tune

Is the current landscape any more hopeful of this vision being realized? I would say not, as the same demon or if you prefer, phenomenon that has dogged human civilizations and co-opted sections of the Church has never died... that is the demon of Empire to which we earlier referred as Colonialism and Imperialism. This phenomenon marked by a history of rise and fall, decline and succession, is always represented in one form or another even to the present day.

Given its nature and history, some modern day representatives of the phenomenon resist or even resent being so styled, with accompanying efforts to disguise that which would identify them as such. Yet there are some intrinsic identifying marks that can never be successfully camouflaged even with the most valiant efforts.

What is Empire? Given variations here or there, it may be fairly accurately defined as a political conglomerate constituted of one nation or country exercising dominant control over other territories. This control leaves such territories with no truly effective powers of self-determination in any really significant areas of their existence and operations. Subordination and dependency become their determinative status in the power relations that exist.

While Empires may take on different forms and seek to exercise their control in different ways, the status of those under its controlling impact and influence does not change.

The sustaining ideology of Empire is one of entitlement, privilege and the assumed right to be in the position in which it is, because of its presumed superiority and manifest destiny to be in such a position. Based upon such pre-conceived assumptions, Empires operated on certain principles, disguised and undisguised.

These principles include:

- Conquest and Expansionism
- Domination and Subordinationism
- Exploitation and Oppression
- Inculturation and Ideological indoctrination
- Social Stratification and Categorization
- Reconfiguration and Resilience

Will the Missionary Enterprise operating from the traditional Imperial centres resist or reflect such or some of such principles?

With the rise of Neo-Nationalism as evidenced in the USA with Trump and here with Brexit how will British Baptists and the wider Church facilitate the realization of this Vision: Members of One Another?

Will our response to the stranger be out of evangelistic pity and piety or fuelled by God's missional mandate to stand alongside a fellow human being?

Interestingly, at this point in time, there has been growing awareness across the board that serious shifts, movements and changes are taking place in the missional dynamics.

Clearly one of the opportunities that has made itself real is the emergence of fresh possibilities for the missional cause to be pursued as the common cause it was always meant to be, based in a community of integrated, non-discriminatory wholeness. It is a moment for the re-appraisal of the essential but varied gifts that are available for the shared commitment, the experience of giving and receiving and of the reciprocity of dependence and inter-dependence. There is clear indication of the need for radical overhaul and renewal of relational strategies, respect, acknowledgement and appreciation.

Aren't we seeing however that old habits do die hard? The last thing one wants to do amidst signs of hope is to emphasise a sense of pessimism that would unnecessarily cast doubt on any real progress that may be in the works. However, the realities themselves are too stubborn to be ignored and their counter-productive impact too painful to be simply shrugged off. There are some things that demand urgent attention, particularly at traditional originating sources of missional endeavours and also at more recent sources within the same geo-political spheres.

There are signs that there is awareness of the new shifts and movements in the missional dynamics. There is noticeable reconfiguration in the vocabulary of mission and its strategic postures. Yet, for those on the historical under-side of the missional enterprise, the reconfigurations are experienced, for the most part, in an odd way, that leaves much to be desired.

If truth-speaking in an honest yet loving spirit is in itself cathartic and therapeutic for the speakers and liberating for the hearers, we may take note here of how the reconfigurations are often perceived from the underside.

Patronage disguised as Partnership

The language of partnership has now come into its own in missional talk but in practice partnership bears distinct signs of Patronage. It is placed within the framework and talked about with a self-perception of strength while designating the other as weak, the privileged and the under-privileged, the powerful and the powerless, the independent and the dependent. It is all couched in an ideological definition of those who have and those who are the 'have-nots' having regard to what are considered essential resources.

Mutuality Infected by Material Superiority

Another word that has gained much currency but which we hear with suspicion is mutuality. What passes for mutuality is implicitly governed by the consideration given to material superiority, so much so that the real meaning of mutuality is modified. Trust, governance, the value of experience, knowledge of contextual particularities still tend to be measured and assessed one-sidedly, with the edge given to where material superiority is in evidence. Different ratings are given to resources because they are not valued equally (or even fairly) in partnerships. When Christian partners contribute different resources, those who have the money and the muscle overwhelmingly decide how things are done.

Counselling labelled as Consultation

Third, consultations are essentially conducted along lines of counselling. The process is relegated to a discussion of how predetermined policy conditions are to be met and regulations to be observed, expectations are to be met. No one is left in any doubt where such conditionalities are established (become universally applicable). Ideological biases and preconceived stereo-typical notions are seen as uppermost; condescension in different forms comes into play to give credence to the consultation label.

One-sided Story Telling

Fourth, missional story-telling of shared experiences is really story-telling of benefactors about beneficiaries, rather than of benefactors who are at one and the same time beneficiaries and beneficiaries who are also benefactors.

The greatest danger is that these newly reconfigured approaches may subvert the real opportunity of embracing the missional possibilities as members one of another.

What Sayest Thou, Fleeting Illusion or Faithful Pursuit?

In spite of all the forces that seem to be contending against the realization of this vision, let us affirm that God asks nothing of us that God will not enable us to experience. It is my conviction that we have to continue striving to realize this vision of oneness, dignity, interconnectedness and interdependence.

In so striving we have to be determined to resist the temptation to assert superiority and the tendency to accept inferiority...we are members one of another!

In so striving we have to commit to stand in solidarity with each other by opening our eyes to the forces that marginalize and oppose any system that reeks of injustice and dehumanization... If we don't oppose openly the inference may be that we are supporting silently.

In so striving we have to be mindful of the battle that we are engaged in...it's a battle for the psyche and souls of persons who have been misused and misled, ostracized and conditioned by centuries of misinformation and lies; it is also a battle for the psyche and souls of those who have been elevated and encouraged to see themselves as superior and entitled.

In so striving we have to be willing to engage in a number of Matters Arising which will involve:

Theological/Christian Education

It is important to acknowledge that there was a theological construct that legitimized slavery and the slave trade, therefore it is equally critical that there should be a theological construct and framework which underpin the rooting out of the legacy of slavery. The notion that blacks were inferior and that the curse of Ham had been placed on us are but two of the lies used historically to keep us in our place; the belief that it was divine providence that blacks were enslaved so that Africa could be reached with the Gospel needs to be debunked.

We cannot be fooled into thinking that all is now well because of the relatively minute numbers of minorities who now occupy places in the corridors of power and privilege. I was intrigued to hear the British Prime Minister referring to some report while stating that racism has no place in this country. Well if the Prime Minister can openly admit that racism exists, surely the church should have been well aware of it long ago.

Advocacy & Activism

If we are members of one another then we have to be touched by the wrongs done to each other and on an occasion such as this, we cannot blind our eyes or deafen our ears to issues such as Reparations & Apology. For those who get turned off at hearing these words especially Reparations, let me assure you that as a black man living in a country that was raped and exploited by representatives of the British Empire, I am not advocating for handouts...as we say in Jamaica 'I am not begging a money'.

This is an issue of Justice. It is undeniable that European wealth including the capital for the industrial revolution was the direct legacy of the cruel and inhumane system of chattel slavery and the exploitation of slave labour. The landed gentry are still represented in the House of Lords; their opulence is inversely proportional to the economic and social deficit of the African people. Furthermore, the twin evils of racism and the resulting, imposed psyche of African self-hate and self-doubt have been skilfully crafted, upheld and fostered over centuries.

The dysfunctional family structure of Africans in the Diaspora in the Caribbean, United Kingdom, Brazil, and the USA is a legacy of slavery. The growth in the incidents of

violence among people of African descent is the perpetuation of the inculcated self-hate.

A full and unconditional apology is necessary from the heirs and successors of those who perpetrated this monstrous crime and who now enjoy the proceeds and privilege of the wealth accumulated from ill-gotten gain. We do not insist on full and unconditional apology as a condition for the forgiveness of those who were behind the slave trade. If the descendants of former enslaved persons had not learnt how to forgive we would not have survived this long. However, the apology is necessary in order that the forgiveness that is on offer can be appropriated, the healing made complete and the chapter closed.

This is a minimum requirement. The least that the dignity of the African people deserves is an acknowledgement that this happened, Britain was culpable and they should hold themselves accountable to contribute in some small way to compensation for the victims of this monstrous crime, their heirs and successors. Compensation is not being sought as a kind of jihad against the sons and daughters of former slave masters. It is necessary as the fruit of their repentance, to show how completely they have repudiated the monstrosity of slavery and its ill-gotten gain.

If we are members of one another then you ought to be courageous enough to engage in this conversation within the framework that a wrong has been done and it is full time to do something about it. It is an opportunity to put the legacy of slavery to rest once and for all. This is not in any way to perpetrate the sense of victim-hood among African people or to give legitimacy to the caricature of the African who always needs the help of the white man. It is intended to repudiate that legacy and to close that chapter once and for all. Without these actions chattel slavery and the slave trade that supported it remain an open, festering sore.

In striving for the realization of this Vision of the church being and becoming an integrated, non-discriminatory community of believers with a shared commitment to Christ Jesus and empowered by the Spirit to serve a common cause, we have to be open to and dependent upon the Holy Spirit.

It is a journey fraught with pitfalls and challenges; it is a journey that is plagued with frustration and helplessness and it will not be long before we realize that in our own strength we are doomed to failure. Thankfully God has resourced us with the Holy Spirit the enabler, sustainer and undergirder.

Let us open ourselves to the Holy Spirit so that we may be on the right side of God as we do what is right in the sight of God.

Let our corporate worship experiences be filled with the move of the Holy Spirit so that we can become a justice movement in the name of Almighty God.

Members one of Another? Let's make it our faithful pursuit!

And to this end we pray:

Negusä Nägäst Haile Selassie I speech to UN, Oct.6-1963- Popularized by Bob Marley in the song "**War**"

Until the philosophy which hold one race superior
And another
Inferior
Is finally
And permanently
Discredited
And abandoned -
Everywhere is war -
Me say war.

That until there no longer
First class and second class citizens of any nation
Until the colour of a man's skin
Is of no more significance than the colour of his eyes -
Me say war.

That until the basic human rights

Are equally guaranteed to all,
Without regard to race -
Dis a war.

That until that day
The dream of lasting peace,
World citizenship
Rule of international morality
Will remain in but a fleeting illusion to be pursued,
But never attained -
Now everywhere is war - war.

And until the ignoble and unhappy regimes
that hold our brothers in Angola,
In Mozambique,
South Africa
Sub-human bondage
Have been toppled,
Utterly destroyed -
Well, everywhere is war -
Me say war.

War in the east,
War in the west,
War up north,
War down south -
War - war -
Rumours of war.
And until that day,
The African continent
Will not know peace,
We Africans will fight - we find it necessary -
And we know we shall win

As we are confident
In the victory

Of good over evil -
Good over evil, yeah!
Good over evil -
Good over evil, yeah!
Good over evil -
Good over evil, yeah! [fadeout]