

FOREWORD TO THE SECOND EDITION

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Every once and again a rare opportunity emerges for a scholar to offer thanks for a text that was important in her or his intellectual formation. Such is the honor that I have in writing this foreword to a new edition marking the twentieth anniversary of the publication of James H. Evans's *We Have Been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology*. I am not alone in my gratitude for this book; at least two generations of theologians in the academy and the Church have been formed by the questions this text raises and the methodological interventions that Evans carries out in it. This is evident in the broad use of *We Have Been Believers* in theological classrooms across North America and in the lively scholarly engagement with the work in countless reviews and citations.

The value of Evans's work for theology and African American studies has been demonstrated time and again in the two decades since it was published. In three new essays written for this edition, my colleagues Linda E. Thomas, Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., and Bruce L. Fields flesh out the continuing contributions of *We Have Been Believers* for new generations of scholars and church leaders and articulate challenges to the book's vision today. Our hope in revivifying the text is to introduce a new generation of readers to the theological and cultural currents that gave rise to the concerns addressed in *We Have Been Believers* and to which it seeks to respond.

The Context for Evans's Work

We Have Been Believers is a work of Black Theology, in the broadest sense of the term. Black Theology is often spoken of in reference to the works of James H. Cone and his dialogue partners. Indeed, many readers' introduction to Black Theology has been Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation*.¹ But Cone's book does not introduce readers to the deep chasms that existed at the time it was written, not only within the black theological academy but also between that academy and the larger black community. Moreover, readers may not be familiar with the sometimes turbulent currents of communal self-identification that went on between the publication of Cone's work and this book's first appearance. An appreciation of these two points is helpful to understanding the enduring value of this text. Before touching on these dimensions of the text, however, a brief reprise of the historical milieu from which Evans's work emerged is in order.

The 1970s and 1980s were decades of great transformation within American society in general and in the black community in particular. During this time, both the promises and disappointments of the Civil Rights movement were coming to full fruition. Of particular interest here is the ambiguous consequence of this mixed bag of social transformation and cultural retrenchment. At the same time that a growing number of black theologians were gaining access to the broader theological academy and publishing houses connected with it (theologians such as James H. Cone, J. Deotis Roberts, and Gayraud Wilmore), a strident wave of conservatism was growing in both the Church and the larger society. A little-understood dimension of this conservative wave was the way that it unfolded within the black Christian community. Because both the religious studies guild and many cultural commentators for the most part dismissed the black Christian tradition as an exemplar of the traditions of the faith, the generally conservative character of the Black Church, both culturally and theologically,² was overlooked in light of its recent social activism during the Civil Rights movement. As a result, the tradition came to be read in a way that did not fully appreciate what was clearly a "natural" divide between the Black Church and the methods of any Liberationist theological project. In addition, within the black Christian community, as in the larger society, the fastest-growing segments of the Church were the holiness and charismatic movements—both theologically

conservative. What this meant was that Black Theology's development during the 1970s and '80s, as a theological discipline grounded in modernist approaches to biblical and ecclesial hermeneutics, happened alongside the growth of movements within the Black Church that were seemingly antithetical to the methods, if not necessarily the goals, of Black Theology. These dual trajectories of development created the first of many chasms between the Black Theology movement and the mainstream of the black Christian community. This situation led to an estrangement which seemed so profound that Cone felt the urgent need to address it in his book *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church*.³

When *We Have Been Believers* came on the scene, Black Theology was estranged from the theological discourses taking place in the mainstream of African American Christian communities, although this estrangement was less intense than it once had been. In my estimation, what Evans accomplished with his book was to bridge this and other chasms that existed in the scholarship and ecclesial practice of African American Christian theological discourse. Specifically, this volume provided a reinterpretation of Black Theology—the most significant theological discourse emerging from the African American Christian community in the late twentieth century—such that it might be available to the Black Church, while still remaining a resource for the broader community of theological education.

While many attributed these fissures primarily to the shifting poles of communal and religious identity, Evans demonstrates that it was also substantially the case that emerging differences in theological methodology in relation to sources, their uses, and the norms by which they are integrated into a theological vision were at play. What Evans helped to make clear was that, contrary to the assumption of many, the major source of fissure was not simply a matter of whether Scripture was being read liberally or conservatively. Rather, it was the case that there was no clearly agreed-upon way to utilize black “experience” as a theological source (a point that Bruce Fields touches upon in his essay). Given the centrality of this category for Black Theology (and most liberationist theologies for that matter), the problem becomes immediately clear. Where Cone had relied heavily on the experience of oppression as both source and norm for his iteration of Black Theology, others such as J. Deotis Roberts drew on the reconciliatory creativity of the black community as the experience from which to draw theological insight.⁴

In addition, many within the black ecclesial community asserted that the black Christian experience from which theology should be done was located in their role as readers and doers of Scripture, in the power of the Spirit.

The issue which made these differences a chasm was that academic theology, and the philosophical systems from which much of it drew, had no way of making sense of the experience of black persons or their communities. Thus Black Theology, as an academic discipline, used categories and frames that made no sense to members of the Black Church because they drew on abstract systems which, ironically, privileged hegemonic normativity. Correlatively, for many “trained” theologians the modes of biblical interpretation and ordering of ecclesial life in the Black Church seemed to lack the critical capacity to do more than reiterate the systems of oppression plaguing the black community, such as the status of women in the Black Church (a point well illuminated in Linda Thomas’s essay). What we find, then, in *We Have Been Believers* is an attempt to give explicit contours to an interpretation of black “experience” that is recognizable by the multiple groups who do theology in, for, and as interpreters of the black Christian community.

Evans also takes on what is a significant difficulty for any conversation about the category of experience as a source and norm for the theological reflection: namely, the general instability of communal identity. I say that communal identity is unstable because human existence, as such, reflects the volatility of ever-changing contexts and the creative responses of persons and their communities to them. This was particularly the case for the black community during the period between the early publications of Black Theology and *We Have Been Believers*. Communal identifications reflected this volatility in the migrations between the descriptors *Negro*, *Black*, *Afro-American*, and *African American*; each identifier had its own particular inflection informed by ethnicity, class, and political aspiration. In addition, during this period there were substantial physical migrations within the African Diaspora in the West, so these descriptions were also ways of orienting persons and communities to particular geographic experiences of being black and encountering racial oppression. In fact, the very usage of the term *African Diaspora* became a way of noting the rich and complex histories and contemporary realities of the multiple communities that had been formed as a consequence of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. By the time *We Have Been Believers* appeared, this complexity was increasingly represented in black communities across the

United States, with migrations from the Caribbean and West Africa, and in the academy as well. While it is beyond the scope of this foreword to give a comprehensive treatment of these currents of identity, it is vitally important for the reader to understand how the terms *black* and *African American* functioned in relation to one another not only in this book but also in the interregnum between the birth of Black Theology and its publication.

The most important migration in communal identity for our consideration was to the term *black*. While for much of Western history this served as a term of derision, even in the communities at which it was directed, in the 1960s insurgent movements within the then-Negro communities appropriated it as a way of claiming the power to reinterpret and autonomously claim communal identity in the public square. Martin Luther King Jr.'s intonation of the phrase "I'm black and I'm beautiful" is an example of this appropriation.⁵ The usage of the term *black* thus signaled the militant refusal to grant to the dominant culture the power of description and definition. Because this migration occurred during the height of United States global hegemony, the initial use of the term *black* carried with it the presumption of American normativity. Consequently, the history and "experience" of black communities in the United States became a central referent for the term *black*. However, because the term *black* was used as a racial, presumptively ontological, category, it quickly became apparent that such a restriction of use was both unwarranted and unhelpful. Precisely because *all* members of the African Diaspora were identified as being members of this race, it became necessary to find a way of speaking about this global dimension of "blackness" while still recognizing the specificity of the differing communities that comprised the diaspora. The term *African American* is one result of this recognition. *We Have Been Believers* is the first text to explore how the relationship between these two modes of communal identification—black and African American—might be creatively understood in the construction of a theology. This leads us to another significant contribution of Evans's work.

The Structure of Evans's Project

As noted above, *We Have Been Believers* is explicitly a work of Black Theology which seeks to speak in two idioms and thereby bridge the chasm which had existed between the academic practice of Black Theology and the theological

discourse of the Black Church. Evans goes about this dimension of his project precisely by structuring his theology systematically in a way that mirrors the touchstones for each of these theological trajectories. He does this first by recognizing the category of revelation as the starting point for his theological construction. While certainly this approach is not unique to the theological traditions of the African American Christian community, it is important to recall that a dominant narrative of this ecclesial tradition is that the Spirit encountered their ancestors in an *extratraditional* way. That is to say, a dominant narrative of the Christian faith in the African American community concerns how God came to the people as they were shut out from the main-streams of the Christian faith in the United States, alienated from the texts of the tradition, and only introduced to Scripture as it was interpreted to legitimate their bondage. This communal narrative privileges the idea of the Spirit working immediately (unmediatedly, to be precise) and only derivatively by engaging with the texts of Scripture and tradition. This encounter is witnessed to and shaped by the testimony of those who have been grasped by this Spirit of God. By starting his theology in the narrative of the *believers*, Evans grounds his entire project in this deep structure of African American Christian faith. This grounding then allows him to utilize the central category of Black Theology—liberation—as a hermeneutical device by which then to interpret the various loci of systematic theology. Where others had begun with liberation as a principle by which to norm the experience of the faith community, Evans begins with the narrative witness of the community from which he then draws a hermeneutic of liberation. This inductive move is crucial in creating a bridge by which Black Theology and the Black Church can interpret “experience” in a way that makes sense to each other.

If a mediation of the category of experience is an important dimension that the reader can take from the text, the next is the methodological construction of a systematic theology based upon that experience. First, however, one should notice how this clarification in theological method is situated in the tradition of African American theological reflection. Howard Thurman’s work *Jesus and the Disinherited*⁶ perhaps best exemplifies the tradition of a mutually inscriptive reading of the biblical text and African American experience—that is, the reading of experience and text to illumine each other. Through Thurman’s narration, the story of Jewish oppression during the Roman occupation and Jesus’ response to it becomes a way to interpret

the racial oppression of African Americans. Correlatively, the contours of contemporary oppression that African Americans experience become a way to plumb the biblical text. By exploring the dynamism of this mutual inscription, Thurman is then able to construct categories through which the Christian faith might be interpreted. While it is true that he uses the language of late-modern Liberal Protestantism, it is generally agreed that what he is enacting is the mode of theological reflection that, as he puts it, he learned on his “grandmother’s knee.” It is my sense that with *We Have Been Believers* Evans substantially extends this methodology, which is deeply rooted in the African American theological tradition, to the construction of a systematic theology.

Evans gives his work the distinct character of being in the stream of Black Theology by including significant insights from African theology and religious practice. By utilizing concepts drawn from a broad range of diasporan belief systems, Evans implicitly argues that there is something that may be called a “black sacred cosmos” which African Americans drew upon in their appropriation of the Christian faith. This methodological move situates *We Have Been Believers* in the mainstream of several movements that were then having significant effect in the Black Theology movement. Drawing on the work of such second-generation practitioners of Black Theology as Dwight Hopkins, Will Coleman, and others, a return to sources such as slave narratives and folklore became central to Evans’s project. In his rendition of this theological return Evans resists the dominant narrative of American religious life that the African American Christian faith was wholly a creature of slavery and therefore only derivative of Euro-American Christian practice. He is then able, in an unfettered way, to reconstruct the categories of systematic theology as reflections of the African American traditions of, and witness to, the Christian faith. This reconstruction was and is *the* bridge that draws together what had been the divides which existed between Black Theology and the theological and ecclesial traditions of the Black Church. Herein lies both the reason for the continuing use of *We Have Been Believers* in multiple settings and its enduring value to theological education.

In sum, this book is an answer to the question: How does one reconstruct systematic theology so that, as a recognizable reflection of the African American tradition of the Christian communities, it can offer the genius and creativity of that tradition to the entire Church?

Appreciations and Critiques

I turn now to introducing the essays that conclude this new edition of *We Have Been Believers*. Precisely because this is a living text that still informs theological education as well as discussions more broadly in the Church about Black Theology, it seemed fitting to invite essays from three significant dialogue partners with Evans's project. Given that a major audience for the work has been the Black Church, an assessment by someone deeply involved in the everyday life of the church who took/takes Black Theology seriously in her or his pastoral practice seemed vital to judging the credibility of the project. It seemed important also to hear the voice of a Womanist theologian whose insights might help identify the continuing challenges for Evans's work particularly, and for Black Theology more generally. Finally, given the reality that, to a substantial measure, the Black Church is conservative and evangelical in its theological outlook, it seemed necessary that an explicitly evangelical assessment be made. We have the good fortune that three stellar theologians have agreed to bring these insights.

The first essay is written by Dr. Linda E. Thomas, Professor of Theology and Culture at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, who is widely known for doing constructive work in Womanist Theology in continuing dialogue with Black Theology. Thomas's work has focused on the intersection of theology, anthropology, and culture; specifically, the ways that black women's experiences can vivify theology as a transformative discourse for the Church and society. She is the author of numerous articles and two books, including a collection of essays on Black Theology entitled *Living Stones in the Household of God: The Legacy and Future of Black Theology*.⁷

The next essay is written by the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., Pastor Emeritus of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. Wright is internationally known as a pastor-scholar who has utilized Black Theology as a basis for building one of the largest churches in his denomination and dedicating it to the transformation of the black community. He is also the author of several books and numerous essays about the role of the Black Church in community renewal and transformation, as well as one of the most sought-after preachers in North America.

The concluding essay is written by Dr. Bruce L. Fields, Associate Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity

School in suburban Chicago. His areas of research include Pauline studies, liberation, and Black Theology. In addition to articles in various academic journals, Fields is the author of *Introducing Black Theology: Three Crucial Questions for the Evangelical Church*.⁸ He is vitally concerned with making connections between the very real liberationist emphases of the Christian faith while remaining true to the Evangelical faith.

In closing, I wish to express my thanks to Dr. James H. Evans for his allowing this edition of *We Have Been Believers* to be an opportunity for several deeply appreciative readers to engage critically the continuing promise and challenges of this work. I also want to express my excitement that yet another generation of readers in the Church and the academy will be introduced to the genius of the African American Christian theological tradition by one of its most important interpreters. One such a reader is Michele Watkins-Branch, my research assistant, whose work was invaluable in the completion of this new edition.