

**PAPER IN CONSIDERATION OF ORDAINED MINISTRY IN
THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

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Someone once asked me the question, "Why are you a minister?" This question originated from a conversation we were having, and the person was questioning the fact that I am a minister, but my thought process is analytical. They caught themselves and said, "I know why, because of the call God has on your life." Since my thought process is analytical, a better question may have been why am I not allowing the Spirit to operate in the space where I am questioning why something is being allowed to happen. I was looking for a concrete answer and sometimes those answers are not available. There are some things only God knows. The question was not the focal point of our conversation, but the question has lingered with me. I often feel as if I came into religion, faith, and Christianity late. I attended church sporadically throughout my youth and young adult life. I was not fully indoctrinated into the rites, rituals, and practices of the Christian church, the black Christian church to be exact. In my opinion that was a hinderance and a blessing.

It was a hinderance because I had to quickly learn the lingo, the songs, the practices, and ways of the church. I had to understand what call and response was. For example, the phrase "God is good all the time" elicited the response "And all the time God is good." No one ever explained to me why sticking your index finger up in the air was proper etiquette when you walked out of the sanctuary during service (I may have ruffled some feathers, since I practiced this behavior.). It was a hinderance because I never fully understood the meaning of salvation. For most of my life, when someone was described as "saved," to me that meant that they were in a special category of Christianity. Not just a regular, run of the mill church goer, but a "believer" believer in Christ. Perhaps my questions and misconceptions about my experience in the black Christian church could

have been answered had I attended Sunday School or Vacation Bible School more frequently. Perhaps my foundation would have been solid ground for me to stand on by the time I began to take God and my relationship with Christ more serious.

On the other hand, the blessing in my delayed walk with God is that the foundation that was laid was a foundation that I had input into building. It was built on my understanding of God, my understanding of how important relationships within the body of Christ are, my belief in Christ shaped and formed without the burden of someone else's fractured theology imposing itself onto my belief. Because I came into my walk as a mature adult, I was able to separate fact from fiction. I did not develop a disdain for women preaching, because I had not been brow beaten with the warped theology that God only called men to preach. I was not offended when a woman walked into church on Sunday morning in anything other than a skirt or dress. When I was told you prove scripture with scripture, I would often wonder why we need to prove that the word of God is true, which fueled my desire to understand not what the biblical text had been translated into, but the meaning of the original text. I wanted to understand what the writers were trying to convey to the people at that time, as well as how the scriptures fit into our present time. It was a blessing because I had never experienced church hurt. I never had the unfortunate experience of feeling violated by the people that represent God. Therefore, never having to struggle with my own relationship with God and my own identity within the body of Christ. I was free to love God, learn about God, and grow in Christ without negative images of the church plastering the walls of my heart and soul. It was a blessing because I was never drugged as a child, that is "drug" to church kicking and screaming. I did not experience the hypocrisy of being told to go to church by parents that lounged on the sofa on Sunday

mornings because I was right there with them on the couch most of the time. I was experiencing God because I wanted to, because God was calling me and not because my mother dragged me to church.

It's also a blessing because by the time I began to seek a more personal relationship with God, my analytical, wondering, questioning, seeking mind was fully engaged. I controlled whether to turn it off and accept what was being taught or preached to me. I allowed my mind to be fully engaged as I explored the "nature of God". I allowed myself to question doctrine, explore the bible from all angles, analyze the relationships in the biblical text beyond the words that were spoken, and examine both social location and cultural environments that heavily impacted those words. I was free to lift the text up off the pages of the bible to explore what was underneath. This was the foundation that my journey with God was built upon and it speaks to the question of "Why are you a minister?". I did not have to unlearn things, and the things that I did not understand I was able to pursue with an freedom unburdened by broken theology and did not have to conform to ideologies that were more harmful than helpful. Therefore, the foundation that my call is built upon embraces the "Why?" while at the same time being fully confident in my faith and belief in God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. I am here at this moment in my life still asking questions, learning as I continue to grow in God, and not being afraid to challenge and ask questions.

What I Believe; Why I Believe in It

I have been fortunate throughout my Christian walk to be put into positions that helps inform, shape, and educate youth in our Christian faith. I'm fortunate because of the inquisitive nature of youth, who continually seek answers to "Why?". It's also an opportunity to begin dismantling some of the broken theology that tends to permeate the church universal and particularly the black Church. Questions that center around God being a man; how come only men are called to preach; is Jesus God; and where does the Holy Spirit come from. These challenging questions force me to examine myself and affirm what I believe and why I believe it.

My beliefs are no different that the beliefs we proclaim in the UCC Statement of Faith. I believe God is an eternal spirit that has no beginning or end. Then I must pause for a second. In the original version of the statement of faith it declares that God is the father of Jesus Christ. The original version has since been adapted by Robert Moss into a doxology, to lift God from the patriarchal robe we tend to dress God in. One must see the dilemma we have put ourselves in by proclaiming God as a spirit in the first 7 words of the statement, then immediately follow it up with claiming God to be male. One can see the tension this places us in when trying to define God on our terms and not allow God to just be God. But it is a tension that I enjoy exploring because it allows me to stake my claim into what I believe while at the same time examining, dismantling, and shedding light on the perils that we create when we simultaneously lift up God and attempt to lift up man at the same time. This tension forces me to ask myself not only what I believe, but how do I believe it. How do I proclaim to love and believe in God and not the people that God seeks to save in holy love? A faithful commitment to God cannot be separated from

a committed relationship with the very same people. I believe that we as a faith community have a responsibility to care for one another, willing to pay the cost of our discipleship as much as we rejoice in our Christianity. Therefore, our belief in God, love for Jesus Christ and dependence on the Holy Spirit cannot be separated from our belief in one another's goodness, love for one another and dependence on one another to make this world a better place. How I believe should be a direct reflection on how I engage on behalf others. The Holy Spirit is more than an agent of God functioning as a reminder of God's love that dwells on the outside of one's soul, but an active participant in the believer's daily interactions. The Holy Spirit dwells on the inside, penetrating our souls with agape love that manifests a love that seeks to do justice, seeks to fight against oppression, speaks for the voiceless and looks to create community. As Dr, Martin Luther King states in his book *Stride Toward Freedom*, "The Holy Spirit is the continuing community creating reality that moves through history."¹ It is the Holy Spirit that has been ever present connecting us from the creation to the second coming and until that day comes, it is the Holy Spirit that empowers us to build just communities, create systems of peace, justice, and compassion. It is the active agency of the Holy Spirit that has been ever so present in the world when change was needed for the betterment of the world.

The same agape love that drives me to love my neighbor as much as I love myself, is the same love that Jesus shows to the world by his crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. Jesus chose to die so that those that believe could live a renewed life, so that those that believe could carry out the mission of spreading God's love throughout the world. My belief in God, my love for God, my belief and love for Jesus has to be carried out in the

¹ Martin Luther King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 1958, location 1442

spirit of John 4:20 “Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” My belief that Jesus is the son of God must manifest itself in my relations to others, whereby I am loving them the way God loved me. Otherwise my belief is selfish, limited, and no earthly good. How I believe must manifest itself in the world, so that God can be seen operating within me and through me to affect change in the world. I believe here is where our “cost and joy of discipleship” that is stated in the UCC statement of faith rests. One cannot enjoy the rewards of being a disciple of Jesus and not be willing to sacrifice themselves in the name of love and justice. If Jesus died so that we may all be free, then we as believers must die unto ourselves to rid ourselves of the halting self-preservation that limits us from being our “brothers” keeper.

The Water, The Blood, and The Body

As I mentioned earlier, I did not begin to fully understand the ways, practices, and ordinances of church life in general until I was an adult in my late twenties. Prior to that, my experiences with church were limited and protracted. I was baptized around the age of 9 but didn't really understand what it meant. I recall walking down the dimly lit hall to the baptismal pool, being dipped in the water by the pastor who I thought was a “cool dude”, walking back down that same hallway almost slipping and falling, but the full weight on the moment was not pressed upon me. I could now say that I was baptized and a part of God's family, but I didn't really understand what that meant. It would take years before I fully understood what that moment meant and what it means to be a part of God's family.

I participated in Holy Communion/The Lord's Supper anytime I was in church and it was offered without fully appreciating the significance of the practice. In the Baptist church

these ordinances hold significant esteem and are pillars in which the faith of the church rests upon. Because these sacred traditions are held in such high regard, my pushback or examination of how these sacred practices were carried out was not fully pursued by me during my young adult years. Within my Baptist context, the Lord's table was not open to those that had not been baptized, as baptism was for those that confessed a desire to be baptized albeit with age restrictions. If a child was deemed too young to confess their desires to be baptized, they were ignored. I reflect in horror, that as a deacon I denied children and adults access to the Lord's table because they had not yet been baptized. Who was I or anyone else to deny access to the table that belongs to God and God alone? My limited view of the sacraments did not end there. I was also of the belief that if you were not fully submerged into the water just like Jesus, I doubted whether your baptism was real. This is the danger of misguided theology coupled with a limited worldview, it produces practices and worship experiences that are alienating, oppressive, marginalizing and paint an unwelcoming portrait of the redemptive nature of Jesus Christ. How must one feel taking part in a sacred community activity like Holy Communion, but to be regulated to spectator and not participant. This is one aspect of my Christian journey where I regret not asking, "Why?". Why must we exclude and not include? Was it not for grace would we be allowed a place at the very same table? It was not until my first semester of seminary where I began to embrace the understanding that everyone is welcome at God's table. I state all of this being fully aware that there are churches within the United Christ of Christ that may believe in a "closed" table and while I do not agree with the practice, I respect their right to operate within the framework of the United Church of Christ that fosters local autonomy among its member churches. My time in seminary

as well as having the responsibility of teaching baptism to children at Covenant UCC has allowed me the opportunity to reflect on what it really means to be dipped into the water. As I have stated, children force you to ponder not just why you believe, but how that belief is acted out. While I still prefer full immersion baptism, there is something about the symbolism of going into the water one way and emerging from the water a new being in Jesus Christ. That act is powerful in its imagery and should be a reminder to all the redemptive work of Jesus Christ that rest in his death, burial, and resurrection. But what I often tell children is that the water is important, but it is not magic. It is important to go into the water, but what is most important is what is happening on the inside of you. On the inside is where God is at work. Furthermore, baptism whether adult, child or infant indicates a belonging into a covenantal relationship that exist between Jesus Christ and the Church. It is not our place to be the gatekeepers of that relationship, but the enablers, witnesses, and companions for those that are seeking to be a part of that relationship. As the table is open to all, all should be welcome into the covenant with Jesus Christ.

The Word of God for the People of God

I recall the numerous times when I did attend church and attempted to read the bible. Typically, I would be sitting near the back of the sanctuary, close to the door never fully engaged in what the preacher may have been saying. I would grab a bible from the back of the pew in front of me and begin reading Genesis, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth..." never getting too far into the book before my mind would wonder. This pattern was on repeat each time I came back to church, until that one day I actually paid attention to what the preacher was saying and here I am today, seeking ordination. Those futile attempts to read the bible highlight how important it is to approach the bible

with sincerity of heart and a humbleness that will allow the words of this sacred text to be of good use to the reader. The bible is not something to be conquered or weaponized but trusted because it has survived the test of time, which leads me to reflect on my introduction to the bible as a literal interpretation. Every word in the bible was true and every encounter in the bible was real and not imagined. This is what I was taught and what I was expected to teach in my capacity as a Christian educator. But those darn children will not let you get away with trying to explain away biblical stories that seem too farfetched to be real. How you approach the text will dictate how you deal with biblical stories that are difficult to place into reality. The question "Why?" is much easier to deal with when you are honest with the fact some things in the bible are imagery, used by God to contextualize a message to God's people in their particular social location. What we as modern-day readers of the text must do is understand the message God is delivering, who the writer is writing to and their context and how the message is applied to us in our context. The word of God is forever truth and never changes, but the readers of the bible are forever growing, changing, and shifting, and what we take away from the text may be different each time we read it.

Consider the context that the bible is the infallible word of God, penned and read by a fallible people. I think what we as readers of the bible must understand is a limitless God has chosen limited people to convey the heart of God. The difficulty is that our limits can cloud our interpretation of what God is saying to us. It is incumbent upon the readers of the Word to seek the truth that is in the text and focus less on the limitations of the authors and our own limits of understanding. How we approach the bible, coupled with our dependence on the Holy Spirit to reveal the truth will move us to the place where God

wants us to be in our Christian journey. There are numerous texts within the bible that some suggest God condones rape, murder of children, and genocide based on a literal reading of the text. Therefore, it is imperative for me to exegesis the text thoroughly, so my understanding of the bible is not limited to my 21st century context. It is our work to tune our ear to better hear God's voice, particularly when the texts strike discordant notes, as they do in passages about merciless warfare, God-sanctioned murder, and abuse of women and children. We should never find ourselves in a position of defending the bible or proving that the contents are real. I don't think God wants us spending our time defending God and the Word of God that we use for guidance as we continue to seek clarity and understanding. The Word of God is strong enough to stand on its own.

If You Don't Stand for Something You Will Fall for Anything

I recall this phrase being prevalent for me during my young adult years as I was growing in God and establishing my presence within my local church. I needed the structure of the church during that time in my life. I needed the mentorship that I received from the deacons, the pastor, the bible teachers; the church helped me to mature. I lost my father at the age of 17 and for the next 10-12 years I felt a little lost and alone entering adulthood. I did not have a steady hand that I could lean back on when I did not know which way to turn or the hand of discipline that I needed when I was out of line or being rebellious. My mother was ever present and supportive, and I had uncles that were available to me, but the presence of a father in a young man's life is unmatched by any substitute. My dad was one of the few people that I was afraid of disappointing. The absence of that fear allowed me to make bad life choices without retribution. It's one thing to know that you messed up, but it's another thing to mess up and then have to explain to your dad what

you were thinking and why it made sense to you at the time. My dad had a way of making me realize the error of my ways by using very few words, but he never let me fail for too long or did not show me the correct way. Therefore, when I began to take God and the church serious, I made sure to surround myself with men that I could draw wisdom from. The church is where I built my foundation. The church is where I was able to grow, make mistakes, be vulnerable, ask questions, be placed into positions that stretched me. As I have mentioned, within the context of the Baptist church I was raised there were issues around patriarchy, the sacraments, literal interpretations of the bible; however, it still was a place that shaped and formed me for the better. The relationships that I formed were life changing for me and I will be forever grateful. In some ways the church is an ideal reflection of the people in the bible. The church is made up of people that have come together seeking God, a worship experience, and a connection with Jesus, but the expectations of those people are not the same. While the people may all be seeking God and worship, they may not be seeking the same thing from God or expecting the same worship experience. I recall a gentleman at my former church who would say from time to time, "Y'all up in here trying to go to heaven." I never quite understood what he really meant by that statement, but what I did take away from his statement is he may not be coming to church for the same reason I am. But that is very much okay and is part of the beauty of the assembly. We are seeking an experience with the same God, for a variety of reasons. God is big enough to handle all that we are seeking. I was seeking a foundation to build my life upon, whereas he may have been seeking a peaceful place to rest his mind after a long week. While we are seeking different experiences, we are at the same time forging relationships within the body of Christ that are the underpinnings of our

Christian experience. Often, we forget that the God we are seeking rest within the people that we are worshipping with and the relationships that are being nurtured are what drives to solidify those relationships, because it is the God within us that attracts one to another. Ultimately, we will all be connected by love which in my view is God.

I will always cherish the time I spent in adult male Sunday School class at my former church. Those men helped to shape and mold me directly and indirectly. I will always cherish the chairman of the deacon board for showing me how to structure a prayer. Our Sunday School teacher had such a zeal for studying and teaching the bible, that I always admired and wanted to be just like him. One of the associate pastors was the epitome of a Christian servant that I admired so much and would always compare my walk with God to the walk he lived. The nurturing and instruction that I received is the foundation that my ministry rests upon. There were life lessons shared in those classes that were invaluable in my development. There are very few places in the world where I could get to learn about God, see Christian living modeled in a way that was desirable for me to emulate and fellowship with men that were concerned with my spiritual growth and desired to protect it.

Before I embarked on my seminary journey, I truly did not understand what social work, community organizing, and political justice had to do with Jesus Christ. My view was that Jesus Christ was our Lord and Savior and if we brought all our concerns and problems to God, God would direct our actions and listen to our prayers. As much as I admired Dr. King, I never made the connection between social justice and Jesus Christ. I never thought that the problems that plagued our communities were issues that the church community needs to be directly involved in or leading the fight against. But now I am of

the belief that if the church is not leading the fight for justice in all the world, then the church is nothing more than a social club with Jesus as its mascot. Again, the action of social justice must answer the question “Why?” Why are we seeking to do justice? The justice we seek must not come from a place where engagement is merely a ritual or hollow act of service. In seeking justice, it must come from a love-ethic that is concerned with the plight of our neighbor. But who is our neighbor? Jesus’s religion made the love-ethic central, when he taught that we should love the Lord God with all our heart and thy neighbor as thyself. Jesus defines our neighbor in the story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus shows in this story that we as the church must cross all barriers in response to someone in need. In essence, every human being is potentially every other human being’s neighbor² (Thurman). If the love-ethic is placed at the center of our faith, our actions towards one another will be directed by the love that we have for each other. The church’s responses to injustices and oppression will not be clothed in self-centeredness, or egotistical endeavors that seek praise and glory. Regardless of where a person in need dwells, the love-ethic that is central to our faith, will guide the church to go beyond only being concerned about someone else’s plight. The love-ethic will compel the church to act; it will move us to help our neighbor in a more meaningful way, regardless of whom that neighbor is or where that neighbor may reside. The love-ethic will compel the church to be less concerned about who is or who is not in the pews and more concerned about filling the communities, where the church building resides with the love that Jesus commanded us to share throughout world.

² Thurman, Howard, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 1976, p.89.

Why UCC? Why Not?

“It affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God.” This statement from the Preamble to the UCC Constitution speaks volumes to me and makes me proud to be a part of this denomination. What this says to me is that the church cannot be stagnant as we move from generation to generation, how we worship and how we express our love for God must evolve to remain relevant within the current context. This is so relevant, because my foundation was built within a context that expected the current generation to view God in the same context of a past generations. Whereas God is the same yesterday, today and forevermore our context is forever changing which changes how we view God. For example, as a kid I viewed God as authoritative, mean and something to be afraid of because I could not measure up to the standards of Christianity. It was not until my young adult years where I began to understand God as a God of love and second chances. What changed? God didn't change, but I did. The context that I was receiving God changed, which allowed me to see a different aspect of God that was hidden from me as a youth. Therefore, as the generations from the past present God to the current and future generations, God must be presented in a manner that does not hinder how someone is experiencing God. It must be presented with an honesty and purity that allows the current and future generations to experience a God that is relevant to their context.

The United Church of Christ was formed from four “theological worlds,” The **Christian Church** which views themselves as part of the body of Christ, the **Reformed Church** believes in the authority of God, scripture as primary, justification by faith, and a

priesthood of all believers, the **Congregational Church** believes that each member of the congregation is important, the **Evangelical Church** believes in spreading the gospel. I believe all four of the “theological worlds” are evident in many of the UCC churches today. I will admit that I am fairly new to the UCC denomination; I began attending my church in the fall of 2010, but from all of the UCC churches that I have come in contact with, they all live out the mission that underlines those four worlds. I think that in today’s world and how the UCC churches operate with local autonomy it would be very difficult to not have an aspect of all four worlds as part of your church mission, theology, operations, teaching and preaching. I believe that as society and as a result the church has shifted its position on LGBTQ rights, acceptance of women in the ministry and non-traditional church services and worship, a church cannot be entrenched in one world, otherwise they run the risk of no longer being relevant and become out of touch with the very people they are trying to serve. What makes we want to be ordained within the UCC is that the polity of the UCC provides space for a congregation I serve in, one that is predominately African American with a ministerial staff that prominently features women, promotes our African heritage, is socially conscious, evangelical and is still has anchors in the more traditional neo-orthodox theological world that for many of the congregants is their foundation. The UCC’s local autonomy and conference associations provides a both/and model that allows the denomination to come together as one but operates independently to meet the needs of the congregants in their local settings.

Influences

I have mentioned Dr. Martin Luther King previously, but I am deeply influenced by the writings of James Baldwin that embraced a transformed theology that held up a mirror

to the distorted Christianity he was exposed to, which served to influence the Black Liberation theology of James Cone. In *A Rap on Race*, Baldwin writes,

“To put it in rather exaggerated primitive terms, I don’t understand at all what the white man’s religion means to him. I know what the white man’s religion has done to me. And so, I could - can accuse the white Christian world of being nothing but a tissue of lies, nothing but an excuse for power, as being as removed as anything can possibly be from any sense of worship and, still more, from any sense of love. I cannot understand that religion.”³

I am of the opinion, what Baldwin did is reject a religious system that white Christians used to facilitate political and societal control, promote hate while at the same time black Christians were joyfully participating in the very same system that has been used to demonize, marginalize, and separate the black community. It is in this space where I see Baldwin’s transformed theology begin to blossom into an amalgamation of negative theology and liberation theology. Elements of Baldwin’s negative viewpoint come in his push back against the Christianity that he witnessed in America, from his viewpoint this Christianity in the black and white churches was not a true representation of God’s love. For Baldwin God was not a dominant, punishing, tyrant that was to be used only to serve our own interest, instead true Christianity seeks encounters with God that transform us into loving, caring honest self- sacrificing human beings. It’s these encounters with God that will liberate us and free us from the hatred and selfishness that shapes so much of American society. Seeking to genuinely love one another and resisting temptations to ostracize and gain power is where one begins to liberate themselves and opens themselves up to reimagining God in new and more powerful ways. The transforming theological space where negative theology and liberation theology intertwine is a launching pad for black liberation theology. For Baldwin negative theology rejects idolatry

³ Baldwin, James, *A Rap on Race*, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, J.B. Lippincott, 1973), p.83.

and a religion based on oppression and hatred, while liberation theology frees black Christians (all Christians actually) to love anew and to identify themselves with a liberating God. The black Christian, the God they worship can now be reimagined into a God that they can identify with. The God that freed the Israelites from bondage is the same God that delivered black people from slavery. The same Jesus that fought against oppression and identified with the least of those is the same Jesus that brought down segregation and Jim Crow. For black Christians God no longer must be the “white God of the oppressor, Jesus no longer has to be the “white” Jesus with the blue eyes and blonde hair. A space is now available to say that God is black and therefore Jesus is black. The black Christian has freedom to reimage and find a new understanding of God that could not be found in the Christian structure that identifies with a “white” God that does not understand the social, political and emotional dynamics of what it means to be black in America. Black liberation theology fills in the gap left open by 18th and 19th European theologians like Karl Barth, John Wesley, Paul Tillich because their understanding of God is from a position of power and not oppression. Black liberation theology frees black Christians to create their own identity, based on their own understanding of God. James Cone writes in *A Black Theology of Liberation*,

“To be free is to participate in a community of those who are victims of oppression. Man is free when he belongs to a free community seeking to emancipate itself from oppression... [Freedom] always involves making decisions within the context of people who share similar goals and are seeking the same liberation.”⁴

Black liberation theology does not end and begin with reimagining God and redefining God in terms of blackness. Once black Christians have freed themselves from the self-hatred and are in a loving relationship with God and their community, they are empowered. That

⁴ Cone, James, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, (Maryknoll, New York, Orbis, 1986), 171

empowerment brings forth action to confront and dismantle oppressive systems and structures that have kept black people in bondage for centuries. James Cones suggests that revolutionary action is the means to reconciliation between black people and the people and systems of oppression. As Cone and Baldwin suggest there cannot be revolution and revolution only, there must be a reconciliation that follows the revolution, otherwise the result is a constant state of chaos. Just as God so loved the world, he sent Jesus into this world to revolt against sin and ultimately reconciles humanity with God; Baldwin's theology pushes love as the ultimate freeing force that will overcome the sin that perplexes us all.

While black liberation theology fills a gap that traditional theologians fail to fill, it still fell short in addressing the masculine viewpoint of traditional theology. One of the critiques of black liberation theology is that its masculinity narrows the space for who can participate. It doesn't open the space for black women to participate in the liberation or for black men that do not meet the criteria of the masculine black man. It was a critique that moved James Cone to revise his theology and address the narrow scope of black liberation theology. For Baldwin this was not an issue. Baldwin's theology was never masculine, nor did it prescribe to the puritanism that was informing theology and American Christianity in general. This is the theology that undergirds my calling. I am black, I am male, I am a Christian and I am liberated.

Now What?

I have spent time examining the "Why" concerning my journey, ministry, and understanding of the church, but what am I called to do? I have been called to teach and preach the gospel. At Covenant I serve as the Assistant Youth Pastor, where I lead the

6th-8th grade group in exploring the bible, Jesus, God, and their relationship with them. I teach our youth baptism class as well as the coordinator of our Confirmation ministry. I also serve as the pastoral liaison for the Second Chance Ministry (social justice and witness), the Housing Ministry, and the Legal Counsel Ministry. These ministries speak to what I am passionate about, advocating for others, serving humanity, and guiding children on their Christian journey. This is my purpose in life. This is what God created me to do and this is who I am. I reflect on my last semester of seminary as I was completing my field studies with The Night Ministry. I was standing on the corner near 54th and Halsted and it all became clear to me. Everything that I had done in my adult life career wise and within the context of ministry has led me to this moment. God created me to be an advocate for others in the capacity of minister. It just all made sense to me, every job I have had, every church experience, leaving my home church, journeying to Covenant, and the circumstances that led me to Covenant. This was all God's plan and now it all made sense, I realized what my purpose in life is and it is such freeing experience. Knowing that God put you on this earth for a reason and to live out that call is an awesome feeling.

This is a far cry from the feelings of doubt, unpreparedness, and disbelief I had during the years I spent running from my calling. I spent so much time examining the missteps and failings of other ministers I was familiar with, I convinced myself that to be a minister I needed to be perfect or appear to be perfect. I never felt I was worthy of the call and being a deacon was good enough or a better term is safe enough for me. It's a very perplexing feeling to know that God is calling you to do something, but you are actively resisting that call. But what is worse is when the presence of the call has faded away.

During the time that I left my home church and joined Covenant, about a year and a half I thought God had taken the call away. I no longer was feeling that pull and it scared me. I thought because I had resisted so much, God said fine and moved on. I felt embarrassed, as if I had let God down. Just how I never wanted to disappoint my dad here I was disappointing God and I was afraid of what was next. But it was during this time of feeling ashamed, embarrassed, and scared that God showed me that it is God's will to be done and not mine. A friend of mine asked me to come speak at their prayer breakfast. I agreed, asked for their theme, and showed up to speak and that was the day that it all came back. I felt good about the words I shared, and my friend was very appreciative, but it was afterwards that the feelings came back, I can't explain those feelings, but I knew what they were. My friend called me later that evening and he was just overjoyed and thankful for the words I shared, it was that phone call that locked it in for me. We both were still full of joy from the prayer breakfast and it was then I knew I had to pursue this call and at that moment for the first time ever I said out loud to my wife that "I think I want to preach." For all the times other people had mentioned me going into the ministry I would always downplay it and say no, but this time I said out loud what I had been running from for almost a decade. Therefore, I will never stop saying out loud how much I love God and I will never stop advocating for others. While my passion is social advocacy, this passion will be realized in a parish ministry context. For me social justice work must be a foundational element of the church and I cannot imagine it any other way. If as I believe God had called me to be a leader within the church, advocating for others will always be a part of any ministry, or church that I have leadership in.

Do No Harm

Do no harm is what comes to mind when I reflect on pastoral ethics. We have a responsibility to care for the people. This means being mindful of the people's feelings, their social location, their vulnerabilities, and their expectations. We must hold the position of minister in high regard and approach the call with the same care, humbleness, and intentionality we do when engaging with the bible. There is a balance that ministers must maintain with respect to the ministry and the perception of the ministry. On the one hand there are people, church members, other church congregants who will place high esteem and regard on the office and position, which the minister must be careful not to let the esteem and praise inflate their ego. While at the same time the minister must walk humbly in their call, while also walking in their authority. The minister must always seek to emulate Jesus, by knowing that the work they have been called to do is a life's mission and one ordained by God, therefore it is imperative that the minister operate within a framework that is honorable, trustworthy and fair. The minister must be willing to receive the burdens and concerns the people will bestow upon them, hold them in confidence, but also not allow those burdens and concerns to wear them down. Burn out is a real issue for ministers and it will creep upon you before you realize it is happening. Ministers tend to be natural leaders and leaders tend to take on more than they should and if this goes unchecked will lead to unhealthy outcomes. Often, we as ministers want to be there for the people all the time and when we as minister's setup this expectation with the people they will take full advantage of it.

As a minister it is important to realize that the church has been functioning since the Day of Pentecost and it will continue to function quite fine if you decide to unplug for a

little while. Ministers must realize that their families are a part of the ministry work as well. They are affected directly and indirectly and that must be considered to maintain a healthy balance between ministry, work, and family life. There was a time in my life where I neglected that balance and caused harm to my family because I was of the belief that they should understand that this was God's work that I was doing. Ministers must set aside dedicated time to be with their families as well as dedicated time for self-care. Ministers cannot pour into people if they themselves are empty or the water in the well is not fresh. Drawing from a dry well does no one any good and is harmful to everyone. The people are not adequately being poured into and the minister is operating at less than maximum capacity. Ministers must also seek continual growth; they must seek fresh water to consume so as they are growing in ministry the people they serve are consuming fresh water to support their spiritual growth.

I do not take the call God has on my life or ordination lightly. This was never a part of my plan if I even had a plan. Therefore, since this is a plan initiated and is being orchestrated by God, I accept it with all humility. I reflect on my oldest daughter who I have had to discipline only 3 times at the most throughout her life. My wife once stated that is because she was afraid to disappoint you, therefore she was mindful how you would respond to her actions. That is the same mindset that I approach ministry, this is not mine, this is God's plan and I love God too much to disappoint. This does not mean I have to be perfect or will not make mistakes, but what it does mean is that I approach this with humility, wonderment, love, and excitement, still asking "Why?" but with all the confidence knowing God has had this in the works since the beginning of time and how awesome is that.