

Following Naked Emperors

Ironically, the most difficult questions we face often have seemingly self-evident answers that can actually mask their deeper complexity. So, it may come as no surprise that when asking any pastor about their vocational identity, the question often falls into this category. After years of training and service, if there is anything we pastors are confident in, it's our vocational identity, which we see through the prism of God's activity in and through our lives boldly inviting others to join in God's transformative work. Yet, despite our vocational certitude, for some, there lingers a troubling suspicion that we may not be as certain of who we profess to be as we proclaim and that our identity may be shaped by forces we are not always fully aware of or adequately acknowledge. Our vocational identity may be draped in all the rich religious symbols, rhetoric, and rituals at our disposal, but upon closer examination, we may be uncomfortably akin to the emperor with no clothes as we participate in performances that reveal more about our vulnerabilities than our certainties. As if this weren't unsettling enough, we must also consider the intersectional complexity of universal and particular aspects of our vocational identity. The question of vocational identity universally applies to any of us serving the Christian church and compels each of us to reflect on who we are in light of the work to which we believe God has called us. However, we must also consider our particularity—the ways particular aspects of who we are shape how we understand and express our vocational identity. It is this consideration for which the issue of race is of particular consequence.

Who Do We Say We Are?

As Black clergy, the best of us strive to provide to those we serve a bi-vocal counter-narrative to the world. We offer the universally treasured Christian invitation to resist conformity to the cultural norms of our time, renewing our minds to a way of life that turns the world's norms upside down. However, this universal message, when encountered through the lens of Blackness, is an invitation to resist the particularly debilitating forces of culture while also remaining attuned to the historical realities of Black lives that are far too often subjected to the lethality of anti-Blackness and the commodification of Black existence. The particular permutation of identity, existing at the intersection of our theology and economic ideology and encountered through the hermeneutics of race, informs our understanding of the vocational calling of Black clergy as expressed in Luke 4.16-19. We are called to consider how the spiritual and material needs of our communities are shaped by prevailing economic ideologies while remaining theological responders to oppression following the example of Jesus. This perspective offers what many Black clergy consider the self-evident response to vocational questions, given the history of liberative thought in the Black church.¹

¹ However, we must acknowledge that this liberative understanding of vocation and ecclesial identity is itself highly challenged in many Black religious communities and reflects the tension between this-worldly and other-worldly readings of the biblical text.

However, the deeper complexities of vocational identity require we also ask ourselves: Have we adequately considered how economic forces shape more than simply our responses to the realities our communities face? Before lifting our voices in proclamation or leading our people in protest, has our identity, or the theology undergirding it, already been (de)formed by the economic milieu in which we are immersed, leading to our inadvertently becoming complicit in the very commodification we aim to resist?² For example, immersed in economic ideologies imposed upon us by culture and reinforced by practice, many of us have become addicted to the dangerously seductive ideas of meritocracy, individual achievement, economic prosperity, and personal agency, all of which are supported by and in support of particular economic ideologies. In too many pulpits, we witness economic ideas, parading as theology, that sustain ecclesial institutions and practices complicit in the maintenance of systems that damage Black existence. Or we watch as our congregations follow our lead and internalize constructions of their Christian identity stripped of its theological substance—where our faith has been hollowed out, and the church joins the emperor naked before the world.

What Happened to My Robe?

I can hear the vigorous objections of my fellow colleagues, dismissing these concerns in light of the decades of the historical-theological witness of Black theology. However, dear colleagues, might this reaction merely reflect the lack of critical self-reflection on the influence of economic ideology on theological principles that shape vocational and congregational identity as we each live out the truth that it is actually much harder to be in the world and not a part of it? While these blind spots exist for all Christians, they present particularly pernicious problems for those of us who come from or minister to communities of color that have been segregated from economic inclusion and are all the more susceptible to the temptations of economic ideology offering the illusion of acceptance into the American narrative without the reality of full participation.³ It is this illusion that has been so seductive and damaging to the poor of our community.

How can our identity be so subtly warped that we, and by extension our congregations, become unwitting partners with the very systems we seek to resist? Well, this challenge is not as foreign to those who follow God as we might first imagine. Throughout the prophetic literature of the Old Testament, we see countless examples of the gradual disconnect between Israel's professed identity and their practices. When we are not careful, the theological foundations of our vocational identity, while remaining cloaked in religious rhetoric, can be insidiously replaced with economic ideas. This transformation allows our identity to coexist harmoniously with the

² If this problem is true for Black pastors, how much more is it compounded for the congregations we lead? As questions of vocational identity ripple through our congregations, they amplify the complex challenge of Christian identity for congregants contemplating their responses to the prevailing challenges they confront. With each ripple, we further impeded our congregation's ability to understand and live out the many mandates of the biblical canon (such as Luke 12:33–34, Micah 6:8, Luke 3:11; 1 John 3:16–18, or James 1:27).

³ Nowhere is the warning of this temptation more evident to us than in the tragic history of poor white communities that have been enticed to embrace economically formed ideas of participation in the American narrative (itself often equated with the Christian narrative), though the commodification of others. We have watched as these narratives have proven illusory, offering deformed ideas of freedom while holding the poor (white or black) trapped as essential non-beneficiaries of broader economic structures.

organizing principles of economic ideology, presenting economic principles as though native to our theology. This produces a mutated vocational identity, even in those perceiving themselves and their churches as rightly formed. This deformity of identity clouds our ability to clearly see the issues confronting us, effectively advocate for our communities, or authentically form our identity or that of our congregants in the image of Christ. We unwittingly affirm a form of conceptual violence, which often precedes physical violence, and normalize the economic violence already perpetrated on our communities.

Who Do You Say I Am?

So, as Black clergy, how do we guard against the vocational disrobing to which we are all vulnerable? Our only safeguard is the confrontation with Jesus' question to his disciples - Who do you say I am? (Mark 8.29) The constant and faithful reexamining of Jesus' identity, and what that identity means for us, is the only guard against the unintentional embrace of economic ideas into our vision of ourselves and the measures of success for the churches we lead.⁴ This proverbial standing before the cross assesses Jesus' identity anew, establishing the boundaries, rules, and expectations of our vocational identity and agency, and constantly calls us to examine possible complicity with the emperor. Reconciling our (and our church's) identities through Jesus opens us to disrupting systems of oppression, making explicit the patterns of non-recognition that have been normalized in American culture, promulgated by religious institutions, and even internalized by segments of the Black community. This allows us to think about our vocational identities as institutional leaders in a manner that does not embrace foundational ideas of success and progress as constructed by the marketplace.

A more faithful and consistent interrogation of Jesus's identity challenges even those of us from oppressed communities to be diligent that we do not unwittingly surrender our true calling to the empire. This may be our only hope for remaining clothed amidst the growing parade of naked emperors before us.

⁴ For example, is the measure of our pastoral success and identity really tied to the size of our ministries, or might our obsession with church membership, revenue generation, or franchised satellite campuses be reflections of economically informed measures of success?