

African American Cultural Gifts

African Americans have unique cultural strength. They focus upon relationships. At a recent meeting five black and three white clergy had a good-natured theological free-for-all about Christians and alcohol. At 1 PM, the customary close, two whites left, while the black pastors stayed for another half hour of fellowship. After 12:00 Sunday, most whites have concluded with worship. Blacks may trickle out at 1:30 PM, to return later.

The custom of standing and greeting in the morning church service, breaking the social surface tension, is illustrative. Whites may greet for 40 seconds, or on warm and sunny days, 60 seconds. Only the wildly gregarious venture a few feet away from their seat. At Love Fellowship, the music starts and all the women hug all the men, and anyone ambulatory hits the aisles. After 5 minutes, even white folks are warming up. You've shown more public affection than in the last six months, and your "smile muscles" ache.

A black pastor called me when I left Inner City Ministries and no longer had an office. He gave me one in his church. Just after our home was burglarized, he called (as did our pastor) to offer help. He leads an inner-city congregation whose sanctuary floods 2-3 times a year. Pastor Johnson once accompanied me into a housing project, fearing I'd be jumped.

Another strength of the African American church is her thankfulness. Whites don't publicly thank God for waking them up. Probably two-thirds of public prayers by blacks include this. No matter what happened last week, the black believer is going to thank God (and maybe "get happy") for getting through it. There will likely be an upbeat "power choir." We're concerned that we hit the E flat, and they're concerned that they flat-out hit 85 decibels.

African Americans are encouragers. No matter how amateur a singer on Sunday morning, the song may crash, but it won't burn. The audience quietly weaves background accompaniment, calling out encouragement, and when finished, the singer will think that she is Alicia Keys or he is Usher Raymond. You simply cannot fail. It's impossible. African Americans generally don't have low self-esteem probably because others are so supportive. Once I taught on marriage in the Caribbean. They were appreciative, but not demonstrative, and I thought that I'd failed. The problem was that African Americans had previously spoiled me with appreciation.

I've also noticed that, in general, African Americans will accept criticism, as long as it is accurate. They will accept it from one another, and from outsiders. Particularly will Black Christians accept admonition if clearly based on the Bible. They will agree with the truth against themselves, when such a situation exists.

By many measures, blacks have better spiritual disciplines. They pray more, read

the Bible more, attend church more. They can smell heresy and bad doctrine and are generally more theologically conservative. Whites can be edified by these cultural assets. Reading E flats is good, too.

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