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The Priesthood of the Pew: Call and Response as the Fulfillment of the Reformation's Liturgical Ideal

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Abstract

The Protestant Reformation championed the priesthood of all believers, an ideal envisioning a participatory and intelligible liturgy unmediated by a specialized clerical class. However, in an increasingly consumeristic and hyper-individualistic Western culture, contemporary Protestant worship often devolves into a spectator event that silences the laity. Employing a Black practical theological method, this paper decenters European historical lenses, positioning the lived praxis of the African American sanctuary as the primary theological text. By examining the roots of hush harbor meetings, the broader liturgical practices of song and prayer, and the homiletical techniques of figures like A.M.E. Zion Bishop James Walker Hood, this study argues that the Black Church tradition of call-and-response serves as the organic and prophetic fulfillment of the sixteenth-century liturgical ideal. The dialogical nature of Black worship dismantles professionalized passive liturgy, grants marginalized worshippers divine somebodiness, and actively actualizes the priesthood of all believers by transforming the congregation into a liberated, vocal collective.

Keywords: Black Practical Theology; African American Worship; Call-And-Response; Priesthood of all Believers; Black Church

1. The Sanctuary as Lived Praxis

The Protestant Reformation was a time of great change. One of the prevailing ideas is that of the priesthood of all believers –the belief that true worship was not performed completely by the ordained clergy, but by those sitting in the pews. The Black church epitomizes this idea with its tradition of call-and-response. From songs to the sermon itself, Black worship carries elements of call-and-response. Call-and-response is found throughout the worship experience, during the singing of the songs. A deacon lines out hymns, or initiates the call, and the congregation responds in repetition with an elongated, stylized melody. There will be others starting songs, and the congregation joining in to assist. This dialogical dynamic is seen in the sermon itself. Preachers will perform a technique called whooping. This is where the preacher pauses rhythmically while delivering the sermon, allowing the congregation time to respond to what is being said. Ashon Crawley would call this Black pneuma. This is a plural movement and displacement of air that enunciates life (Crawley 2017, p. 38). It is in this rhythmic breathing that the Black church gains life.

In the history of the African American experience, call-and-response represents the epitome of the Black experience. Whether in singing or preaching, the Black experience is defined by call-and-response. Henry Mitchell states that Black preaching is inherently dependent on it (Mitchell 1990, p. 31). Though many things were taken away from

Check for updates

Academic Editor: Hwarang Moon

Received: 12 July 2026
Revised: 9 September 2026
Accepted: 11 September 2026
Published: 16 September 2026

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African Americans during the Middle Passage, call-and-response is one cultural identity marker that survived the journey. The people who were captured and brought to this country through the transatlantic slave trade brought with them many things, and their use of rhythm and movement came with them. One of the ways that this survived was through the ring shout. These ring shouts laid the groundwork for many African cultures to retain aspects of their African heritage, which they later fused into modern worship. These practices caused many of the slavers to think that this was some form of idolatrous dancing and revels, but this was not the case. Samuel A. Floyd Jr. states, "They brought with them and altered to their new circumstances the apart-playing, polyrhythms, cross rhythms, timeline, elisions, hockets, ululations, tremolos, vocables, grunts, hums, shouts and melismatic phrasing of their homeland." (Floyd 1995, p. 38). This was the Africans maintaining their connection to the continent. This dynamic represents what Robert Farris Thompson identifies as a 'flash of the Spirit', an action, movement, or artwork with roots in Africa that has spread across the diaspora. Call-and-response has its roots in West Africa, especially among the Yoruba and Bakongo peoples. Call-and-response is an interlocking system of performance (Thompson 1983, pp. xiii–xiv). This system is a part of the African American liturgy. However, to fully grasp its liturgical function, one must expand on the definition of call-and-response beyond its conversational dynamic.

While the practical mechanics of call-and-response are evident in this conversational understanding, the work of call-and-response has both theological and cultural roots. Floyd showcases that call-and-response is rooted in West African traditions. Homiletically, the work of call-and-response is linked to what Jon Michael Spencer and Mitchell identify as the activity of the pew and co-creatives in a dialectical event (Spencer 1987). Theologically, this antiphonal exchange is what Crawley identifies as Black pneuma—a deep assertion of a shared breath (Crawley 2017, p. 31). By demanding the vocal and physical participation of every worshiper, call-and-response moves beyond a simple rhetorical tool and becomes a radical ontological claim that actively resists being silenced and marginalized. Call-and-response structurally enforces the priesthood of all believers.

When African Americans made it to the New World, they were stripped of many things. Many of them were forced to abandon old worship practices and ideas and attend the churches of their enslavers. Though they were in the services, they felt something was missing. So they would sneak away to worship God in their own way in Hush Harbor and Brush Arbor meetings. In the woods, or even in their cabins, African Americans would sing, shout, and worship God as they felt. It was call-and-response that helped preserve community bonds during slavery but facilitated profound encounters with the Holy Spirit. This also allowed slaves from different tribes and traditions to bond as a community and learn the biblical text (Costen 1993, p. 44). This brought about a unique encounter with the Holy Spirit.

This interaction with the Holy Spirit is different from the European understanding of how the Holy Spirit works. Within mainstream strands of sixteenth-century European Reformation, particularly in the theology of John Calvin, the Holy Spirit is understood as having a job more about intellectual understanding than physical understanding. The Holy Spirit's role was to help the believer understand the Bible better. John Calvin points out that the Spirit instills in the mind what the congregation received through the word (Calvin 1960, chap. 4.20.33, p. 747). The idea of the Spirit's work is mainly intellectual, which led to a silent posture in parts of European worship. This contrasts sharply with the enslaved view of the Spirit.

For the enslaved, the breath, or the pneuma, was a sign of worship. When they gathered to worship, it was not complete without the participation of worship through breathing. These worship experiences gave the enslaved an identity. Crawley points out,

"... the capacity for the plural movement and displacement of inhalation and exhalation to enunciate life, life that is exorbitant, capacious, and fundamentally social, though it is also life that is structured through and engulfed by brutal violence." (Crawley 2017, p. 38). Crawley shows how call-and-response is a way for Black people to better navigate the situations they face, especially during worship.

Worship has aided African Americans in their plight here in America. The worship experience often provided what James Cone calls "somebodiness." Cone states, "Because religion defined the somebodiness of their being, Black slaves could retain a sense of the dignity of their person even though they were treated as things." (Cone 1991, p. 17). The Black church is foundational in providing agency for people who had none. In the freedom of talking back to the pulpit, they created a system of liberation. Crawley suggests that the antiphonal nature of the celebration in Black preaching provides the people with a choice that cannot be circumscribed through violence and violation (Crawley 2017, p. 50). Through the antiphonal nature of Black worship, congregants discovered a vehicle for liberation. By talking back to the preacher, enslaved worshippers transformed the monolog about their plight from their slavers to a dialog (Earl 1993, p. xiv). The praxis of call-and-response is a liberating praxis of the Black church. Though the Reformation sought to liberate itself from the control of the Catholic church, this work will argue that the call-and-response tradition of the Black church lives out the mandate of the priesthood of all believers.

To demonstrate this, this paper employs a Black practical theological method, drawing upon the framework of Dale P. Andrews. For Andrews, Black practical theology is defined: "My desire is to move Black practical theology more deeply into an exploration of the faith claims functioning in Black religious folk life." (Andrews and Smith 2015, p. 8). For Andrews, the goal of Black practical theology is to provide a praxis-oriented theological method to help heal the divide within the Black Church by advancing social reform. This is accomplished in three ways: exploring Black folks' religion, uniting the pastoral and the prophetic, and fostering prophetic accountability. This concept differs from other forms of practical theology. This differs from the European view of practical theology.

Gerben Heitink defines practical theology as "... the empirically oriented theological theory of the mediation of the Christian faith in the praxis of modern society." (Heitink 1999, p. 6). Heitink's view of practical theology focuses primarily on empirical research into faith in general, while Andrews seeks ways to improve the Black church specifically. While Heitink's concepts can be applied to the Black Church, Andrews' work identifies specifics unique to the Black experience. There is a level of understanding of the condition and position of African Americans that must be defined to do Black practical theology from the perspective of the unique and marginalized Black community, whereas Heitink's view is more universal for the Church at large. This is why this particular method is being used for this paper.

Rather than evaluating the Black Church through a European lens, this method begins with the lived praxis of the African American sanctuary as the primary theological text. By starting in the pews, it critically interrogates the sixteenth-century Reformation ideal and demonstrates how the Black homiletical tradition serves as its prophetic and liberative fulfillment. To understand the full prophetic weight of this Black liberating praxis, it must be placed in dialog with the historical tradition it organically fulfills: the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation.

2. Reformation and Individualism

The Reformation brought about many changes to the worship experience. To understand the push for greater participation in the worship experience, it is necessary to discuss what it was like at the time. First, the worship service had many degrees of separation.

Medieval Latin worship experiences were more visual than anything else, but much of what was seen was either controlled or blocked. Often, worship took place on a high altar. This height meant that even the people in the front row were far from the priest. So there was a physical distance between the worshipers and the priest (Duffy 1992, p. 111).

Not only was there physical distance, but there were also physical barriers that were in place. The biggest barrier was a rood screen. The rood screen was a set of windows in a frame for liturgical drama that stood about waist-high. During the Lenten season, a veil was added to completely block the people's view. This was increased to the point that no one could see at all during Lent. Not only was there a rood screen, but also a veil that stretched from the ceiling to the point where worship was unseeable (Duffy 1992, p. 112).

The worship experience for many parishioners was something of a personal, quiet matter. The priest would show the Host, which was meant to be seen, but was consumed by the priest. The priest would often whisper much of the liturgy, as they did not want the people to hear what they were saying. The parishioners' job was to kneel quietly in prayer during the service (Duffy 1992, p. 117). In much of the worship experience before the Reformation, parishioners were not participants in the service; this is partly what fueled the Reformation.

The concept of the priesthood of all believers is often attributed to Martin Luther. Luther is said to have held this belief in the highest regard, but, according to Timothy Wengert, Luther never stated it in any of his writings. Wengert calls this a pious myth that was imposed on him 150 years later by Philipp Jakob Spener (Wengert 2005, p. 2). Luther was actually arguing for a more radical idea. He felt that all people had the right to stand or have status before God. Luther is quoted as saying, "For whatever crawls out of the baptismal font may boast about itself that it is already consecrated a priest, bishop, and pope, although it is not seemly for each to exercise such an office."(Wengert 2005, p. 16) In other words, there are not two distinct estates in life, secular or sacred. All can be in those places, but not all should. The church should confirm those offices. For Luther, the idea was that no matter our estate or standing in life, we should seek to serve others. Active congregational participation was central to liturgical reforms envisioned during this period.

Another issue that plagued the early church concerned private worship services. Priests would hold masses in Latin for those who could afford it. Martin Bucer thought that the priest should have held the service on Sunday, when the entire congregation could attend (Bucer 1525, p. 37). For Bucer, the communion was a communal event. John Calvin also supported this idea by pushing that all who attended the worship service could participate. To acclimate the congregants to communal singing, Calvin initiated instruction among the children so they could, in turn, teach their parents (Maag 2016, p. 221). This reflects the push by many Reformers for a more inclusive and participatory view of worship.

This participatory view of worship appears to be lost in modern Western culture. The push for individualism has led many to take the Reformers' concept and turn it inward. E. Randolph Richards and Richard James, in their work, suggest that Western culture has taken the more collective nature of the Bible and has led it to be read and understood as an individual pursuit. They point out that in our individualist culture, we sit in a room, compose an email alone, and send it to a particular individual, and we approach the text in the same way. But Biblical culture was collectivist, and Paul often wrote to a group from another group, as in Thessalonians (Richards 2020, p. 19). This reflects how Western culture has shifted not only the Bible but worship from a group endeavor to a personal mission.

This may be due to the deliberate shift that took place during the Reformation. As the Reformation began to take shape, there was a deliberate shift in the senses. Medieval worship was primarily focused on sights and sounds, with an emphasis on communion.

The Reformation shifted worship from those other senses to a more auditory sense. Susan Karant-Nunn points out that the Reformation sought to make worship more focused on the auditory sense than on any other. Karant-Nunn states, "Worship services in their entirety ceased with the Reformation to be the replication of a miracle and became a means of shaping the individual faithful instead." (Karant-Nunn 1997, p. 185). This shift in focus is what many see today in a culture that prioritizes the individual pursuit over the collective.

First, though the Reformation sought to create the priesthood of all believers, it seems to have continued pursuing that vision. Over centuries marked by increasing individualism and market consumerism, contemporary Western practice has often drifted from the Reformers' radical ideas of democratized liturgy, leaving modern congregations largely passive. Looking at modern worship, where the stage is the focus: congregations hire professional musicians and sit in auditorium-style seating. This accomplishes the Reformation wish to make worship more auditory, but appears more passive. As Karant-Nunn states, pews held their bodies in place like they had not been before, and they listened, received, and submitted (Karant-Nunn 1997, p. 118). This could be fueled by the push from Reformers like John Calvin, who states, "Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists." (Calvin 1960, p. 1292). However, when detached from a robust congregational antiphony, this intense focus on correct formal delivery can unintentionally generate a one-sided performance dynamic. In contemporary Western adaptations, prioritizing proper liturgical order has often slid into an overreliance on credentialed platform professionals, leaving the congregation to observe sacred acts rather than actively participate. This shows a focus more on the ordained or, in modern times, hired professionals than on those in the congregation. This modern worship might not reflect the Reformers' dreams for the future.

To support this, Luther, in his work, saw the Reformation as a new way to engage with what was already going on. Jacob Baum suggests that the Reformation did not strip Christianity of its sensory experience, but it was not a continuation of what came before (Baum 2019, p. 11). This shift did not mean that the worship service was intended to be a quiet, private affair in which individuals engaged in a monolog. There was an expectation of participation in the worship experience. Calvin points out that the congregation should be able to engage in the worship experience by agreeing with the preacher. This is why Calvin pushed for the preacher to speak in a way that the people could understand. For Calvin, prayers should be said in the vulgar language rather than in a language people do not understand. How could people say "amen" to something they do not know? (Calvin 1960, p. 747). Calvin, much like Luther, felt that the worship experience of the Reformation was meant to involve the people's participation. According to Baum, the preached word was meant to intensify the patterns of the sacrament by moving the person emotionally toward conviction (Baum 2019, p. 125). The sermon was meant to be not only heard but also experienced and responded to emotionally, even verbally, with an amen.

3. Reclaiming the Priesthood Today

The Black preaching tradition embodies the ideas that both Calvin and Luther wanted for the worship experience. First, the Black preaching tradition is performed in the language of the people. Henry Mitchell points out that for Black preaching, the word must be translated into the "mother tongue," that is, imagery and idioms of the Black masses (Mitchell 1990, p. 15). Black preachers take the stories and principles of the Bible and express them in ways that reflect both the times and the culture of African American life. Mitchell points out that many push back against Black preachers using such language because they see it as ghetto or unrefined. Still, Mitchell suggests that, much like Calvin, not

using the people's language is an affront to those they serve (Mitchell 1990, p. 80). Cleophus LaRue supports this by stating that the Black preacher's job is to "make it plain". For LaRue, this means preaching the gospel in a way people can understand and identifying where the good news applies to them (LaRue 2000, p. 12).

Secondly, Black preaching makes room for congregational participation. The heart of Black preaching is that everyone is involved. Yes, the preacher is a principal part of the worship experience, but the songs and other elements need to involve the people. During the antebellum hush harbor meetings, enslaved communities would sing communal praises to God accessible to all participants. In a collection of slave narratives, a formerly enslaved woman named Emily Dixon described how they would go to the meetings and sing, hum, and shout together throughout the service (Mellon 1988, p. 185). From the beginning of the Black worship experience, participation from everyone was expected. Given that during this time, many of the slaves could not read or write, the songs were hymns sung from the heart to their God.

Considering the Black experience with both audience participation and being performed in the language of the people, call-and-response in both preaching and the worship experience is a manifestation of what the Reformers sought to accomplish. As Crawley states in his work, the Black pneuma of worship is what the Reformers were seeking when they pushed for the priesthood of all believers (Crawley 2017, p. 50). For Black people who had little power, worship provided them with the somebodiness that permitted them to participate in the worship experience. Henry Mitchell calls the congregational response both freeing and affirming (Mitchell 1990, p. 112). Call-and-response both frees and affirms the preacher and the people. It frees them from the troubles and pressures of the world, but also affirms their importance.

How does one engage in call-and-response, specifically in preaching? This can be seen in the preaching of AME Zion Bishop James Walker Hood. Hood became a Bishop in North Carolina after the Civil War. The country was in distress, but Hood used his preaching skills to invite his congregation into the sermon in several ways. First, Hood would call for people to participate directly in the worship experience. This direct act gives the congregation permission to engage. He would also ask them a series of rhetorical questions. He would ask questions and then provide the answers, speaking as if he knew what they were thinking. For example, in a sermon on the Rich Man and Lazarus, entitled "Why was the Rich Man in Torment?" Hood asked, "Tell me, my unconverted friend, how shall I win thee? Hast thou a tender spot, a sympathetic cord that I can touch—no, not I, but the Holy Spirit—and melt thy heart into love ?" The question invites the audience to ponder and respond, both spiritually and physically. One more popular use of call-and-response and engagement in local vernacular is through hypophora. This is dramatically acting out scenarios by voicing not only the characters but also the people's potential objections. A good example of this comes from Frank A. Thomas's work "They Like to Never Quit Praising God." Thomas opens the work by talking about a sermon from a preacher by the name of Uncle Pompey. He was preaching a sermon about a man named Uncle Wash. Uncle Wash was popular in the community and helped many people until he went to jail for stealing a pig. After that incident, he died. Uncle Pompey states that going to jail does not necessarily mean you are a bad person, using Paul and Silas as an example. He closes the sermon speaking about how he sees Uncle Wash climbing Jacob's ladder and being welcomed into heaven. When he almost reached the top, the pearly gates swung open, and they were singing the song "There is a Fountain Filled with Blood," which in the second verse speaks about a dying thief. The congregation begins to shout (Thomas 1997, pp. 1–2). This is similar to Calvin's call to speak intelligibly. Uncle Pompey was speaking in a language and a style that the people could understand and relate to directly. Another technique is to use conversational anecdotes with

the listeners. Hood, in his preaching, would ask direct questions to people in the audience. To drive home a homiletical point, he asked a woman who died a hypocrite if she was cold, questioning whether she possessed any true religion. Lastly, Hood would make a direct plea to the audience. These techniques are not unique to Hood; many Black preachers employ them for call-and-response (Hood 1884).

While outsiders might confuse the charismatic nature of Black preaching as a renewed form of clerical dominance, the dialogical nature of call-and-response actively prevents ecclesial hierarchy. Rather than completely dismantling all ecclesial structures, the praxis of call-and-response continually disrupts, complicates, and subverts clerical dominance. The give-and-take is between the preacher and the congregation. The preacher depends on the people for their vocal consent. The people retain the power to withhold an amen and institute accountability instantly. This ensures that the congregation and the preacher collaborate during the preaching moment. This action mirrors the Protestant rejection of ultimate clerical authority.

One of the biggest arguments against call-and-response is that it relies too much on emotion and lacks intellectual understanding. This criticism appears valid on the surface but lacks depth when explored in two ways. The first is that call-and-response is not a barbaric or animalistic practice. Many scholars overlooked call-and-response as a legitimate practice because many intellectuals viewed it as more about emotion than anything else. It was the people giving in to their primal instincts. Crawley pushes back against this idea by stating, "As life and love, these performative dances, songs, noises and tongues illustrate how enjoyment, desire and joy are important for the tradition that antiphonally speaks back against aversion, embarrassment, and abandonment, against the debasement and denigration of Blackness." (Crawley 2017, pp. 7–8). In other words, what appears to be wild and ecstatic emotionalism was actually a bodily response against those who debased blackness. Call-and-response is a bodily response to Black circumstances. This is important because Blackness requires a whole-body response.

To comprehend the motivation behind call-and-response, one must understand that Black worship is not just an intellectual activity. Those who view call-and-response as merely an emotional activity miss the point that Black worship requires the whole person. For Black worship to be truly effective, it must engage on cognitive, intuitive, and emotional levels. When engaging in call-and-response in worship, the worshiper slows down, allows all the words to sink into the deepest parts of them, and works on the person from all aspects of life (Mitchell 1990, p. 97). The use of the whole body and the full engagement of the emotive, as well as the intellectual, helps worshipers engage not only with the world but also with God.

4. Conclusions

The Protestant Reformation initiated a significant theological shift by dismantling the monopoly of worship and seeking to give the people access to divine power. However, this work demonstrates that the historical trajectory of European Protestantism has faced difficulties in developing its own liturgical ideas. When European Protestantism limited the work of the Holy Spirit to mainly better understanding scripture and helping congregants cognitively, the European Reformers may have unintentionally created a hierarchy focused on intellectual pursuit. Ultimately, the Black church's living tradition of call-and-response stands as a prophetic realization of the participatory aspirations championed by sixteenth-century Reformers. By breaking clerical passivity and affirming the divine 'somebodiness' of every worshiper, the antiphonal sanctuary recovers the priesthood of all believers not as a remote doctrinal artifact, but as embodied communal liturgy.

This differs sharply from the Black church tradition, which resolved the heart of the Reformers not through deep systematic treatises, but through lived somatic praxis. The Black church, which operated outside traditional European institutions, pushed for an active, audible, and participatory worshiper. Call-and-response is more than a stylistic preference of the church; it embodies the somebodiness of a people who were often viewed as less than.

Therefore, while Western Protestantism often claims the historical lineage of the Reformation, the true participatory nature of the Protestant Reformation was lived out in the Black church experience. The antiphonal exchange that takes place in many Black worship experiences provides true spiritual illumination that is not separated from the communal voice and breath.

Ultimately, to claim the priesthood of all believers, practical theology must move past textual accessibility and intellectual assent. The legacy of the Black church demonstrates that a truly engaging liturgy requires a vocalized theology. This is a theology in which the congregation is never just the audience but a vital participant in the revelation of the Holy Spirit.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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