

Assignment Title: Reading Report

God in the Ghetto / Report by Dr. William Augustus Jones, Jr.

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Overview

The author, Dr. William Augustus Jones, Jr., a third-generation Baptist preacher was an associate of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.¹ He served as pastor of Bethany Baptist Church, Brooklyn, New York, for 43 years.² He was a religious and civil rights leader who for many years fought for human rights and economic justice. He passed away on February 4, 2006.³ According to Jones, the word ghetto was first used in Venice during the sixteenth century when it was applied to the section where the Jewish colony lived. The Kerner Commission defines it as any area within a city characterized by poverty and acute social disorganization and inhabited by members of a racial or ethnic group under conditions of involuntary segregation. Jones said in America, the designation is almost synonymous with the Black community.⁴ With writings, including historical facts and sermons, Jones writes about America's tarnished history of intentionally institutionalizing racism. He provides examples of what it means to stand and speak up for the voiceless and marginalized. The book tells us what it is like to go into the ghetto and transform it into a power to liberate people. Jones addresses forces that sap the economic vitality and social viability of Black lives. He posits an ideological superstructure—"The System"—that regulates the flow of capital to the wealthy, destabilizes the poor's economic situation, deprives the Black masses of social legitimacy, and overdetermines the racial prospects of striving African Americans.⁵ Jones describes the centuries' old machinery of capitalism, racism, and militarism that has been well oiled, which used Christianity as the lubricant, to maintain and preserve both white supremacy and the ghettoizing of Black Americans, regardless of socioeconomic status or

¹ William Augustus Jones, Jr., *God in the Ghetto. A Prophetic Word Revisited* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2021), 188.

² *Ibid.*, 226.

³ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xv.

dwelling place. Jones said, “a simple surface diagnosis of “The System” reveals a sick sociology based on a faulty anthropology, which emanates from a false theology.”⁶ This book addresses the many questions: Where is the church? And the faith leaders' roles as the nation trends backward.

One of the purposes of *God in the Ghetto* is to provide a theological lifeline for Black pastors seeking to link ministry with prophetic thought and social activism. It invites you to consider racism on a level that touches the soul. In her presentation at Alliance University, his daughter, Jennifer Jones Austin, states that the book helps you understand the game and how to change it. She says if you don't understand the game, you cannot do anything about it. The book enables you to appreciate what it means to be a faith leader. The pathway might be lonely, but it's ok. We are with the majority, and that's what matters.

Analysis

God in the Ghetto is a call to American society to recognize that the people who live in the impoverished neighborhoods spread across this country are children of God who are entitled to equality and opportunity as much as those who live in far more affluent regions. It is a challenge to America to make economic investments in these communities.⁷ The book is also targeted at anyone serious about the practice of religion, who wants to study the basis and foundation of the black church as a revolutionary instrument to empower the downtrodden, anyone concerned about the plight of blacks and other oppressed.⁸ The writing is to some

⁶ Ibid., xviii.

⁷ Ibid., 181.

⁸ Ibid., 192.

degree formal. He uses historical data, sermons, essays, foreword, afterward, and epilogue, but straightforward language to convey his points. The content, genre, and tone are appropriate for his target audience. Overall, the book serves its intended audience. It is timely and uses languages and situations that the audience can identify with.

One of the strengths of this book is that it provides us with background/historical facts, so the reader, who might not be knowledgeable about the country's history, can have an idea of what happened and why there is a call to do something or to change the system. For example, Jones note, "lynching was commonplace, the Ku Klux Klan rode with almost total license, and states' rights were sacrosanct. The nation was without a moral conscience. Most Blacks had little to look forward to except a life of toil and sweat beneath the burning sun in the fields of Dixie. In 1910, 75% of all Blacks lived in the rural South, shackled and bruised by the iron chains of segregation."⁹ Also, where he said, "but to treat violence as a new thing is absurd, when just a scant trace of history reveals that violence is closely akin to Americanism. America's beginning was on a bloody basis. The land was taken from the Native Americans by violence; independence was secured by violence; Blacks were enslaved by violence."¹⁰

Another strength is that Jones did not only provide us with his opinion but also used the Scriptures to strengthen his points. Jones quoted Luke 4:21, and using Dietrich as his mouthpiece, he said Jesus was a man for other people. Jesus came to declare God's presence in a carpenter shop, on a fishing boat, on a hillside, in little children, in a harlot's life, and on a Jericho road. His direct line to glory was not interfered with by His direct line to people.¹¹ He said preachers try to theologially justify human slavery by saying that Blacks are children of

⁹ Ibid., 10.

¹⁰ Ibid., 58-59.

¹¹ Ibid., 134.

Ham, who God forever cursed to an existence of servitude. Jones said even with this perverted interpretation there's no biblical basis for denying slaves access to the gospel. Onesimus, a runaway slave, was given the gospel by the apostle Paul and sent back to Philemon as a beloved brother.¹² Also, he said, "the idea of a racial church was unthinkable to the tentmaker from Tarsus. Christ was not divided, nor was He a divider."¹³

A third strength of this book is that although this book was originally written in 1979, it is still relevant. It is still current. Many of the incidents or behaviors that were present then are still occurring. James Forbes writes in the introduction. Fast forward now to the present time. The ghetto is still with us. The plight of the people of color is lamentable. Voter suppression strategies are steadily being devised. Police brutality towards the Black community is outrageously uncommon. Social and economic disparities are disgraceful for a democratic society, and racism still impacts every dimension of our public life.¹⁴ Claybon Lea Jr. states *God in the Ghetto* remains relevant. He provides current examples of the proliferation of police and civilian killings of unarmed African Americans, such as George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. He continues by saying the continuation of unfair hiring practices, lending practices, and sentencing practices is proof that the more things change, the more they remain the same.¹⁵

Conversely, I think there was too much repetition of what was already said toward the end of this book. Also, I think some of the latest additions would be better suited at the front of the book.

¹² Ibid., 33.

¹³ Ibid., 49.

¹⁴ Ibid., xxiii -xxiv.

¹⁵ Ibid., 176.

Take-A-Ways

Based on this reading, I have a few thoughts/concepts about the urban poor and the church. First, Jesus came for and could identify with the urban poor; the church is expected to care for them as Jesus did. Jones notes Jesus Himself is the role model for all who claim an affinity with Him. His hometown was the slum section of Galilee. He grew up in a ghetto. He sat and supped with sinners. So blighted saw the town of his rearing that when Nathaniel first heard of Him, he asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"¹⁶ Wherever He went, from Capernaum to calvary, He was engaged in fellowship with the forgotten and showed love for the least.¹⁷

Secondly, it is clear that the urban poor look to the church for messages of hope. The book shows how the church, in response, provides just that. The songs, messages, and sermons used are similar among the black churches or urban poor. Richard Wright wrote, "our churches are where we dip our tired bodies in cool springs of hope, where we retain our wholeness and humanity, despite the blows of death from the Bosses."¹⁸ Jones preached many messages of hope in his sermons. In one instance, he preached, "He came in flesh, for flesh. Ask the five thousand men plus women and children. They'll tell you, "He fed us totally." Ask the guests at Cana's wedding feast. They'll tell you, "He turned tragedy into triumph." Ask our fathers and mothers held in chains of bondage. They declare, "I love the Lord, He heard my cry, and pitied every groan. Long as I live and troubles rise, I'll hasten to His throne."¹⁹

¹⁶ Ibid., 47.

¹⁷ Ibid., 46.

¹⁸ Ibid., 79.

¹⁹ Ibid., 96.

Thirdly, God has commissioned the church to proclaim the good news to the poor. Jones and other writers in the book repeatedly quoted Luke 4:18-19, The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Jones stated Christ brought the Good News to dusty roads and back streets, and He voiced God's concern about all human conditions detrimental to the abundant life.²⁰ God forbid we mistreat or abuse, or use words or languages to diminish the least of these. He wants them to know that He died for them too, and that they also have a seat at the table.

Application

I can also implement some of these takeaways in my life and future ministry. I can show that I care for the poor by purchasing from companies that contribute to or help to eradicate poverty. I can volunteer or join a mission team that helps serve the poor internationally. At times the oppressed only need a word of hope. I could make myself available to do this one and one. I could also organize a group to reach more people at any given time. It goes without saying that the Good News/the gospel is also for the poor and oppressed. I could be more intentional about spreading the gospel within this sphere.

²⁰ Ibid., 46.