

SUNDAYS IN EAST NEW YORK: 1948–1960

Jared E. Alcántara, PhD, Professor of Preaching
George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University

Abstract: *In the mid-twentieth century, New York City experienced a renaissance of Protestant preaching. William B. Lawrence identifies four preachers who won acclaim: Harry Emerson Fosdick, Ralph Sockman, George A. Buttrick, and Paul W. Scherer. Lawrence argues rightly that these preachers were popular and influential; however, his research delimits the renaissance to white Mainline ministers. Preachers from minoritized churches also maintained vibrant preaching ministries in the city. In this paper, I consider the ministries of Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Sandy F. Ray, and Gardner C. Taylor, three black Baptist pastors that ministered in “East” New York, to expand the contributions to preaching’s renaissance in the city as well as bring their stories closer to the center of homiletical-historical inquiry.*

Introduction

When Gardner C. Taylor started his ministry at Concord Baptist in 1948, New York City already had a strong reputation for having several nationally known, widely-regarded preachers. At that time, Taylor claims, New York was “the center of the greatest concentration of preaching that this country, and perhaps the world, has ever known in one city at one time.”¹ In *Sundays in New York*, William B. Lawrence claims that at least four preachers—Harry Emerson Fosdick of the Riverside Church, Ralph W. Sockman of Christ Church Methodist Episcopal, George A. Buttrick of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, and Paul E. Scherer of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church—won acclaim in their churches, in itinerant ministry, and in radio preaching.² According to Lawrence, “Their influence extended well beyond the congregations and the city in which they served.”³ Fosdick had the greatest name recognition. From 1927-1946, Fosdick preached radio sermons for the *NBC National Radio Vespers Hour* at a time when religious radio reached “130 million faithful weekly listeners.”⁴ Fosdick’s program alone attracted two million listeners.⁵ Robert Moats Miller claims, “Fosdick’s national influence cannot be understood without reference to ‘National Vespers.’”⁶

No doubt Lawrence’s book sheds new light on liberal American Protestant preaching at its zenith. Even so, it delimits New York’s mid-twentieth century preaching renaissance to a subset of preachers. “Sundays in New York” means “Sundays in *Manhattan*,” and “great preachers” means “great *white* Mainline preachers.” Some of New York’s largest and most dynamic churches were minoritized black churches outside Manhattan. Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem had a much larger membership than the churches pastored by Fosdick, Sockman, Scherer, or Buttrick.

¹ See “Great Preachers Remembered,” The E.K. Bailey Conference on Expository Preaching, Dallas, Texas, 1996, in Gardner C. Taylor, *The Words of Gardner Taylor: Lectures, Essays, and Interviews*, ed. Edward L. Taylor, vol. 5 (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2004), 113.

² The only preacher who did not pursue radio ministry was George A. Buttrick. He opted to pursue publishing instead. He also delivered the Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale in 1939. See William B. Lawrence, *Sundays in New York: Pulpit Theology at the Crest of the Protestant Mainstream, 1930-1955* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 10.

³ Lawrence, *Sundays in New York*, 18.

⁴ Robert Moats Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 380.

⁵ Fosdick drew two million listeners “including Larry Williams and the teenage M. L. King Jr.” See Keith D. Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Its Sources* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 48.

⁶ Miller, *Voice of Deliverance*, 380.

In 1950, Abyssinian had approximately 15,000 members, and it competed with Olivet Baptist in Chicago in its claim to be the “largest Protestant church in the world.”⁷ Black pastors in “East New York” had preaching ministries that rivaled and, in some cases, surpassed that of their peers even though they did not get the same opportunities in radio preaching.⁸ Three preachers in particular stand out as exemplars: Adam Clayton Powell Jr. of Abyssinian Baptist in Harlem, Sandy F. Ray of Cornerstone Baptist in Brooklyn, and Gardner C. Taylor of Concord Baptist in Brooklyn. To be sure, other vibrant black Baptist churches and non-Baptist churches maintained strong ministries.⁹ That stated, these churches were notably large and known for preaching in the 1940s and 1950s.

In this article, I will assess the preaching ministries of Powell, Ray, and Taylor from 1948 to 1960. Although their stories and trajectories are more dynamic than this time frame permits, 1948 to 1960 aligns their ministries with the dates of the preaching renaissance described by Taylor.¹⁰ In the conclusion, I will consider historical-homiletical implications in dialogue with these figures.

Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. (1908-1972)

According to Harlem historian Herb Boyd, “No name is revered in the history of Harlem as Adam Clayton Powell Jr.”¹¹ His work as pastor at the historic Abyssinian Baptist Church and later in the cause of civil rights as a U. S. congressman made him a figure of national and international prominence. To many, he was a symbol. “As minister to more than ten thousand people,” Henry J. Young writes, “[Powell] emerged as a significant spokesman in Harlem by the time he was twenty-three.”¹² In *Black Religious Leaders*, Peter J. Paris describes Powell’s widespread influence this way: “For over a quarter of a century the names Abyssinian Baptist Church and Adam Clayton Powell Jr., were virtually household terms throughout Black America. In many respects the religious institution and its pastor had come to symbolize the political struggle

⁷ Nora Holt, “Abyssinian Baptist Largest Protestant Church in The World,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 2, 1950, 16. Others claimed that Olivet Baptist in Chicago, also numbering close to 15,000, was “the largest Protestant church of any race in the world.” See Wallace D. Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915-1952* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 46; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63*, vol. 1 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 55–56; Wallace D. Best, “‘The Right Achieved and the Wrong Way Conquered’: J. H. Jackson, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Conflict over Civil Rights,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 16, no. 2 (2006): 200.

⁸ The phrase “East New York” has a literal and a symbolic connotation. It describes a neighborhood in Brooklyn that still exists today. In the early part of the twentieth century, its residents consisted of mainly Italian and Jewish immigrants. In the 1950s, the area was plagued by crime. Then, in the 1960s, city planners and real estate developers collaborated to transform it into a ghetto. See Walter Thabit, *How East New York Became a Ghetto* (New York: NYU Press, 2003). I use the phrase “East New York” as more of a symbolic rather than a geographical category. “East New York” has sometimes been used symbolically and even colloquially to communicate “the other side of town” that has been neglected by the city, by the press, or by the official histories.

⁹ For a discussion of strategic and influential non-Baptist black churches in Harlem in the first half of the twentieth century, churches such as St. Mark’s Methodist Episcopal, Mother Zion Church, and St. Phillip’s Protestant Episcopal, see Hart M. Nelsen and Anne Kusener Nelsen, *Black Church in the Sixties* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1975), 21–32. See also Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto; Negro New York, 1890-1930* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 115. For more on Pentecostal Holiness churches in Brooklyn, see Clarence Taylor, *The Black Churches of Brooklyn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

¹⁰ Taylor, *The Words of Gardner Taylor*, 5:113.

¹¹ Editor’s Note in Adam Clayton Powell Jr., “The Abyssinian Baptist Church,” in *The Harlem Reader: A Celebration of New York’s Most Famous Neighborhood, from the Renaissance Years to the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Herb Boyd (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003), 89.

¹² Henry J. Young, *Major Black Religious Leaders Since 1940* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 64.

for racial justice in this country.”¹³ Before Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X arrived on the scene, Powell “earned the reputation of being Mr. Civil Rights.”¹⁴ In 1944, he became only the second African American to win a seat in Congress.¹⁵ In his autobiography *Adam by Adam*, Powell recalls how heavy the burden felt when he began working in Congress. He writes: “Millions were depending on me to do a task for them, and not just the people in my District.”¹⁶ Especially in the early years, Powell received countless bags of letters from African Americans in other parts of the country suffering under segregation and looking to him to be their advocate in Washington.¹⁷

Before rising to prominence in Washington DC, Powell distinguished himself as the pastor of the prestigious Abyssinian Baptist Church, a beacon for civil rights since its founding in 1808.¹⁸ His father, Adam Clayton Powell Sr., had pastored there from 1908 to 1937 and had seen the church through a season of extraordinary growth in membership, financial support, a new church building, and extensive land acquisition. The church had seven hundred members when Powell Sr. began and twelve thousand members when he retired.¹⁹ As a child, Powell Jr. recounted watching his father preach to thousands under a large canvas during the new church building’s construction: “For two summers, under that canvas,” he writes, “thousands were packed in every night as he preached.”²⁰ His father held a close friendship with black Nationalist Marcus Garvey. Powell Jr. listened to Garvey’s teachings with great enthusiasm as a little boy.²¹ Powell Sr. built the new church building next door to Garvey’s Black Freedom Hall as a statement of solidarity with Garvey’s movement. In addition, Powell Sr. made the church more “Harlem-minded.”²²

Blacks in New York struggled greatly during the Great Depression on account of segregated housing, job losses, and other forms of racial discrimination due to Jim Crow laws. The needs of the working poor were different than the needs of upper-class intellectuals at the Riverside church. Hence, when Powell Jr. assumed his pastorate in 1937, Abyssinian was *more* than a Sunday morning church. It had a community center “packed from basement to gymnasium to rooftop, morning and night, throughout the week.”²³ By 1948, Powell Jr. had grown the church from twelve thousand to fifteen thousand.²⁴ The church owned property; it had five choirs, a famous pastor emeritus, and a well-known pastor. It was thriving. To get a sense of the scale of Abyssinian’s influence, consider that in the year 1959 approximately 13,000 young people attended the church’s Youth Emphasis Week.²⁵

¹³ Peter J. Paris, *Black Religious Leaders: Conflict in Unity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 152.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁵ The first black congressional leader was Representative William L. Dawson (1886–1970) of Chicago, a Democrat who served in the House of Representatives from 1943–1970. For more on Dawson, see Committee on House Administration of the U.S. House of Representatives, “William Levi Dawson,” in *Black Americans in Congress, 1870–2007* (Washington DC: United States Congress, 2008), 292–98.

¹⁶ Adam Clayton Powell Jr., *Adam by Adam: The Autobiography of Adam Clayton Powell Jr.* (New York: Kensington, 2002), 73.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁸ For more on the founding of Abyssinian in 1808, see Paris, *Black Religious Leaders*, 153.

¹⁹ Powell Jr., “The Abyssinian Baptist Church,” 93.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Powell writes: “Father kept pushing to make the Abyssinian Church more Harlem-minded.” *Ibid.*

²³ Osofsky, *Harlem*, 92.

²⁴ Holt, “Abyssinian Baptist Largest Protestant Church in The World,” 16.

²⁵ “13,000 Youngsters Attend Abyssinian’s Youth Emphasis Week,” *New York Amsterdam News*, Feb 7, 1959, 8.

Powell Jr. gained notoriety for reasons other than the growth of the church. Early on, he built a reputation as a controversial figure. His first wife, Isabel Washington, was a divorced nightclub singer whom he married in 1933, a choice that did not sit well with older parishioners at Abyssinian.²⁶ In 1944, he divorced her because of an extramarital affair with Hazel Scott, a popular jazz pianist and nightclub singer from Trinidad.²⁷ They married in August 1945. In November 1960, they divorced and, less than three weeks after his divorce was finalized, on December 15, 1960, Powell married a 29-year-old from Puerto Rico named Yvette Diego in a private ceremony. Diego was a young divorcee whose father owned a cockfight arena. Powell introduced her to his congregation at Abyssinian at the New Year's Day service on January 1, 1961.²⁸

Powell's theological positions also strayed far from black church orthodoxy at that time. Had it not been for his father, it is unlikely that Powell Jr. would have been offered the job at Abyssinian. In his autobiography, Powell Jr. writes: "We do not believe in the Bible as the word of God. It is too filled with contradictions. We believe in the Thomas Jefferson Bible...that brilliant Founding Father cut from the New Testament only those words that Jesus spoke. This is the Bible from which I preach."²⁹ According to Paris, "Powell was not an orthodox Christian thinker. He did not believe in the traditional doctrines of hell."³⁰ Heaven and hell, Powell argued, were "right here in the span of years that we spend in this body on earth."³¹ Powell also emphasized the teachings of Jesus as a guidebook over the sacrifice of Jesus for salvation.³² To be a Christian meant to usher in the kingdom here and now by living a Christ-centered, Spirit-filled life of peace and justice. This way of conceiving of the gospel was similar to but not the same as Martin Luther King Jr.'s model of Christian discipleship.³³ For Powell, to be a Christian meant "bringing more beauty, truth, and goodness into the world and into the lives of others—of all peoples in all places, wherever one can find them or their need."³⁴ Young describes Powell's theology this way: "His eschatology was geared toward the realization of God's possibilities for mankind within existence itself."³⁵

As a congressman in Washington, D.C., Powell also picked fights with political opponents. In the mid- to late- 1940s, he engaged in an ugly verbal altercation with President Harry Truman after his wife Hazel, a professional musician, was denied the use of Constitution Hall for a performance because she was black. Powell insisted that Truman take a stand. When Truman's wife decided to attend a tea sponsored by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), Powell insulted Truman's wife as a way to return the favor. Furious, Truman referred to Powell at a private staff meeting as "that damned n[---]r preacher."³⁶ For the remainder of his presidency, six more years, Truman refused to invite Powell to White House functions and channeled all patronage jobs through Powell's political rival, black congressman William L. Dawson from

²⁶ Charles V. Hamilton, *Adam Clayton Powell Jr.: The Political Biography of an American Dilemma* (New York: Atheneum, 1991), 80.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 163.

²⁸ "Adam Powell's Wife to Face His Church," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 31, 1960, 1.

²⁹ Powell Jr., *Adam by Adam*, 43.

³⁰ Paris, *Black Religious Leaders*, 146.

³¹ Powell Jr., *Adam by Adam*, 39.

³² *Ibid.*, 44.

³³ For instance, see Martin Luther King Jr., "Unfulfilled Dreams," in *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran (New York: Warner, 2000), 191–200.

³⁴ Powell Jr., *Adam by Adam*, 43.

³⁵ Young, *Major Black Religious Leaders Since 1940*, 59.

³⁶ As cited in Hamilton, *Adam Clayton Powell Jr.*, 165.

Chicago.³⁷ In 1956, Powell surprised Democrats by supporting Dwight D. Eisenhower for president.³⁸ He had collaborated with Eisenhower over desegregation laws at the local and regional levels and had no problem breaking ranks with the Democratic Party through offering his endorsement.

In 1952, at a gathering of civil rights leaders at Abyssinian, an event Gardner C. Taylor attended, Powell called the U.S. the “the most hated nation on earth” because it was “export[ing] Jim Crow along with democracy.” He said that hypocrisy in the ‘white church’ and ‘Negro church’ was the “underlying reason for most of our chaotic racial and democratic life.”³⁹ In his autobiography, he writes: “America is not a Christian country. It is a country of pretensions, of ‘churchianity’ . . . perverted into an instrument to perpetuate if not to propagate, directly and indirectly, anti-Christian doctrines of segregation and discrimination.”⁴⁰ According to Paris, Powell had this side of him as well, a side that was impatient with America for its failure to keep its promises to the black community and impatient with the church for its collusion with the powers and principalities of the world. Paris writes: “In fits of anger Powell often leveled blanket statements of condemnation at America.”⁴¹ In 1960, Powell challenged America again through a highly unpopular move: he supported Fidel Castro’s regime in Cuba citing the failures of the U.S.-backed Batista government. He praised Castro for his willingness to nominate Black Cubans to high government posts, and he chided the U.S. for meddling in Cuban affairs. These statements did not play well at a time when accusations of Communism were directed at ordinary Americans in the age of McCarthyism.⁴²

Early in the 1960s, Powell faced numerous trials for tax evasion and ethics violations and, in January 1967, he was censured by Congress. After receiving a public rebuke on the floor of the House of Representatives, Powell walked outside, stood defiantly on the steps of the Capitol, and exclaimed to thousands of supporters: “Behind me in this Congress is the biggest bunch of elected hypocrites the world has ever known.”⁴³ Some saw Powell’s bluntness and crassness as a flaw, but his constituents in Harlem found his candor refreshing rather than troublesome. After several legal battles and a triumphant return to Congress in 1968, Powell lost his seat in a Democratic primary in 1970 to a young politician named Charles Rangel. He lost the seat that he had held since 1944 by a total of 150 votes. Powell retired from Abyssinian in 1971. On April 4, 1972, in Bimini, the Bahamas, he died after experiencing complications from prostate cancer surgery.

In a 1996-lecture on great preachers, Taylor recounted two memories of Powell’s preaching. First, he remembered hearing Powell preach shortly after the first assassination attempt on Martin Luther King Jr. in September 1958, an event we will discuss in our section on Sandy F. Ray. Shortly after the assassination attempt, Powell preached a sermon titled, “‘They came to slay the dreamer,’ going back to Joseph. It was a tremendous presentation.”⁴⁴ Secondly, Taylor

³⁷ Hamilton, *Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.*, 20. For more on the confrontation between Truman, Truman’s wife, and Powell Jr., see also Tracy D. Snipe, “The Role of African American Males in Politics and Government,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 569 (2000): 20.

³⁸ Hamilton, *Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.*, 277.

³⁹ “America Most Hated Nation on Earth- Powell,” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 16, 1952, M2.

⁴⁰ Powell Jr., *Adam by Adam*, 42.

⁴¹ Paris, *Black Religious Leaders*, 175.

⁴² See Ted Morgan, *Reds: McCarthyism in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Random House, 2020).

⁴³ Hamilton, *Adam Clayton Powell Jr.*, 21.

⁴⁴ Many black preachers ascribed typological significance to King’s ministry, especially after his death. Powell linked him back to Joseph “the dreamer.” Other preachers linked him to Moses. Some linked him typologically to John the Baptist’s ministry in the wilderness. For the Powell story, see Taylor, *The Words of Gardner Taylor*, 5:114.

remembered Powell's tone: "There was an anger about him, but it was an anger all tied up with Jesus Christ, and it came out in his preaching."⁴⁵ Powell believed that Jesus came to overturn power structures and to usher in a revolution of radical inclusion. In his own words, "Any church that in any way preaches or practices anything that will exclude anyone from membership is negating the power of Christ."⁴⁶

Powell had remarkable gifts as a leader and public servant. Although some of his personal and political decisions and actions were controversial and remain so to this day, his impact on Abyssinian continues to be felt, and his legislative legacy on civil rights endures. Moreover, he influenced an entire generation of pastors and public servants including the Rev. Al Sharpton.⁴⁷

Sandy F. Ray (1898-1979)

In 1948, Sandy F. Ray already had a vibrant preaching ministry. Taylor describes him as "in the glory of his noonday powers...People were attracted to hear him from all over that city and all over the country."⁴⁸ Born and raised in Palestine, Texas, Ray studied at Morehouse College where he built a lifelong friendship with his classmate Martin Luther King Sr. Prior to Cornerstone, Ray served three other churches, two in Georgia and one in Ohio. Immediately before Cornerstone, he pastored for seven years at the prestigious Shiloh Baptist Church in Columbus, Ohio, where he became an acclaimed Sunday radio preacher. In 1942, he became the first black representative "elected to the legislature in the state of Ohio."⁴⁹ When he went to New York in 1944, he arrived at a "small, unattractive edifice in a declining neighborhood, a church that offered no prestige."⁵⁰

Cornerstone Baptist experienced extraordinary growth under Ray's leadership. Five years into his ministry, Ray held memberships in close to twenty-five community organizations including the NAACP. At ten years, Cornerstone had more than doubled in size from 2,500 to 5,500 members. It added a day care and credit union during a time when legalized segregation was the norm. Ray joined the preaching circuit. In so doing, he became "one of the great contemporary pulpiteers" of his day.⁵¹ He ascended the ranks of his denomination serving as president of the Empire Missionary Baptist Convention of New York (1954–1979) and as the first vice president of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc. (1968–1979).

In 1954, his first wife Katherine, an accomplished musician and piano teacher to whom he had been married for twenty-five years, initiated a legal separation citing irreconcilable differences.⁵² Later, he married Victoria McPherson, a cosmetician, who died in 1966.⁵³

Ray also acquired political capital. A vocal Republican, he campaigned for Governor Thomas E. Dewey in 1950 and Nelson D. Rockefeller years later. According to Brooklyn church biographer Clarence Taylor, "Rockefeller was a frequent visitor to Cornerstone."⁵⁴ Most black

⁴⁵ Taylor, *The Words of Gardner Taylor*, 5:114.

⁴⁶ Powell Jr., *Adam by Adam*, 45.

⁴⁷ The well-known preacher and political activist Al Sharpton met Powell when he was twelve years old. Powell nurtured and counseled him. Sharpton later told the *New York Times* that, on account of Powell's influence, he became an activist like the militant pastor from Harlem. See Taylor, *Black Churches of Brooklyn*, 211.

⁴⁸ Gardner C. Taylor, *The Words of Gardner Taylor: Special Occasion and Expository Sermons*, ed. Edward L. Taylor, vol. 4 (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2004), 113.

⁴⁹ J. Zamgba Browne, "5,000 at Rev. Ray's Rites," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 21, 1979, 10.

⁵⁰ Pastor W. Franklin Richardson, "Introduction," in Sandy F. Ray, *Journeying Through a Jungle* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979), 20.

⁵¹ "Know Your Pastor," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 20, 1954, 16.

⁵² "Sandy Ray Separation Now Official," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 11, 1954, 1–2.

⁵³ "Mrs. Sandy F. Ray (Obituary)," *New York Times*, January 5, 1966, 31.

⁵⁴ Taylor, *Black Churches of Brooklyn*, 118.

pastors in Brooklyn were Republicans at that time with Gardner Taylor being one of the exceptions.⁵⁵ Of course, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. was a leading Democratic figure, but he was in Harlem.⁵⁶ Some of his supporters wanted Ray to run for a Republican congressional seat, but he decided against it.

In 1949, Ray and Dodgers baseball star Jackie Robinson had to appear before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in Washington, D.C.⁵⁷ At the hearing, they refuted claims by Paul Robeson that “American Negroes would never take up arms against the Soviet Union.”⁵⁸ In addition to reaffirming his patriotism, Ray used the spectacle to speak publicly against the evils of segregation. He exclaimed: “We believe that the pattern of segregation in our National Capital itself gives comfort to our enemies and weakens our position in world councils... We believe that those who lead in democracy should be criticized and prodded by citizens of that democracy.”⁵⁹

In July 1957, Cornerstone hosted the famous young evangelist Billy Graham. That same summer, Graham had been preaching to 18,000-plus crowds at Madison Square Garden. Ray personally invited Graham to preach on the steps of Cornerstone on a Sunday afternoon and Graham accepted. That Sunday, Graham preached a surprising politically charged sermon in which he spoke out against racist and segregationist laws and called for national changes in legislation, a move that no doubt alienated segregationist members of his constituency.⁶⁰ Over twenty local pastors and leaders supported the event, including Gardner C. Taylor. More than 3,000 people attended.⁶¹

In the late 1950s, Ray’s friendship with the King family took on political overtones when Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested during the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. Ray not only rebuked southern white supremacists in the aftermath of King Jr.’s arrest; he also flew to Alabama whenever he could to attend the meetings and participate in trainings and anniversaries. Whenever King Jr. came to New York, Ray also supported “Mike” (King’s birth name) by raising money and providing hospitality. King looked up to Ray and referred to him as “Uncle Sandy.” In an address delivered to three thousand people in Brooklyn in 1956, King Jr. said: “You know, for years, he was ‘Uncle Sandy’ to me. I did not know he was not related to me by blood until I was 12 years old.”⁶² According to Richard Lischer, King looked up to Ray as one of his top three role models in preaching and pastoring, the other two being William Holmes Borders and Gardner C. Taylor.⁶³

⁵⁵ For more on black Republicanism in the mid twentieth century, see Joshua D. Farrington, *Black Republicans and the Transformation of the GOP* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

⁵⁶ Taylor, *Black Churches of Brooklyn*, 118.

⁵⁷ It is unclear what led to Ray and Robinson having to appear at a hearing in the first place. They were not involved in any Communist-friendly activities at the time. See Chequita Cynthia, “‘Race Dissatisfied, Not Disloyal’- Ray,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 16, 1949, 9–10. Also, in 1949, on the occasion of his five-year anniversary at Cornerstone, his church had become large enough to throw him a twelve-day celebration including the renowned Rev. C. L. Franklin of Mount Lebanon Baptist Church and an up-and-coming young preacher who had been in Brooklyn for less than one year at Concord Baptist: Gardner C. Taylor.

⁵⁸ Cynthia, “‘Race Dissatisfied, Not Disloyal’- Ray,” 9.

⁵⁹ “Billy Graham: Heaven Won’t Let Racists In,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 20, 1957, 19.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Cholly Herndon, “Sidelights of A ‘Kingly’ Meeting In Brooklyn,” *New York Amsterdam News*, March 31, 1956, 20.

⁶³ Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Word That Moved America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 39.

In 1958, the King and Ray connection grew stronger when a mentally unwell woman named Izola Ware Curry stabbed King with a letter opener during a book signing in New York. After his release from the hospital, King convalesced for three weeks in the Ray family home.⁶⁴ Then, in 1966, when Cornerstone opened a new community center, King delivered his famous sermon, “Guidelines for a Constructive Church,” in the church sanctuary.⁶⁵ The friendship that began with “Daddy King” at Morehouse in the late 1920s continued for decades. In 1974, Ray gave the funeral eulogy for King’s mother, Alberta Williams King.⁶⁶

During his life, Ray preached several famous sermons such as “The Challenge of the Wood Country” and “A Voice in the Wilderness.”⁶⁷ He also published a sermon collection titled *Journeying through the Jungle*.⁶⁸ He died on April 11, 1979. In the eulogy, his close friend Gardner C. Taylor delivered a eulogy in which he called him a “president of preaching” and a “crown prince of the pulpit.” “This pulpit was his throne,” Taylor said, “and he made it to ring with good news and glad tidings.”⁶⁹ Recalling the quality of his preaching, Taylor said, “[I]t was hard to tell whether one heard music half spoken or speech half sung. And when the glad thunders of that voice reached its climactic theme, the heavens seemed to open, and we could see the Lord God on his throne.”⁷⁰ Taylor also remembered, “[Ray] had an amazing gift for taking the most ordinary circumstances and enlarging them. That was the way Jesus did, enlarging small things into eternal meanings.”⁷¹ Milton K. Curry assesses Ray’s lasting impact on Cornerstone: “He transformed it into one of the truly great churches of the nation while remaining active in politics and developing a close personal friendship with top government officials.”⁷² Curry, Taylor, and others who knew Ray had an abiding affection for him as a pastor, preacher, and person.

Gardner C. Taylor (1918-2015)

Gardner C. Taylor served three congregations prior to coming to Concord in Brooklyn. He came to his first pastorate, Bethany Baptist Church in Ohio, while a student at Oberlin College, his second pastorate in New Orleans, Louisiana, at Beulah Baptist Church, and his third in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, at Mt. Zion Baptist Church, the same church his father, Washington Taylor, had pastored. His father was one of the great preachers in the South. “Wash” died suddenly in 1931 when his son was just under 13 years of age.⁷³ In Baton Rouge, Taylor gained a large following of students and professors at Southern University, he established a radio ministry, and he spoke at churches, chapels, and graduations. According to Gerald Lamont Thomas, “The preaching success

⁶⁴ A fuller account of this story can be found in David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Quill, 1999), 109–11.

⁶⁵ See Martin Luther King Jr., “Guidelines for a Constructive Church,” in *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran (New York: Warner Books, 2000), 101–16.

⁶⁶ Clayborne Carson et al., “Sandy F. Ray,” in *The Martin Luther King Jr. Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2008), 284.

⁶⁷ Ray, *Journeying Through a Jungle*.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ “A President of Preaching: For Sandy F. Ray, New York, April 21, 1979,” Taylor, *The Words of Gardner Taylor*, 4:140.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 4:141.

⁷¹ Ibid., 5:114.

⁷² Milton K. Curry Jr., “Foreword,” in Ray, *Journeying Through a Jungle*, 12.

⁷³ Taylor describes the loss of his father at such a young age this way: “The large place which he had held in my mind and heart was suddenly made empty.” See Gardner C. Taylor, “Why I Believe There Is a God,” in *Why I Believe There Is a God; Sixteen Essays by Negro Clergymen*, ed. Howard Thurman (Chicago: Johnson, 1965), 104.

of Taylor along with his instant popularity took the Mt. Zion congregation to higher heights, as the largest church in the city.”⁷⁴

In 1948, Concord called him to be its new pastor. At the 1948 Louisiana convention meeting, Taylor told the delegates, “God has called me to preach at the crossroads of the world. I must go.”⁷⁵ The news devastated the church in Baton Rouge. At his farewell sermon, the church was standing room only, and radios throughout the black community were tuned to his weekly radio program.⁷⁶

When Taylor arrived in New York, Concord already had five thousand members, a large facility, a proud history, strong ministry programs, a solid record on civil rights, and a long tradition of preaching pastors. According to Timothy George, Taylor was stepping into “one of the most prestigious pulpits in the country.”⁷⁷ Although most thirty year-olds would be intimidated by this assignment, Taylor recounts: “the more I preached the more they began to trust me and realize my talents not only as a preacher but also as a pastor.”⁷⁸ One church congregant named Anna Belle recalled his first sermon: “When he came that first Sunday morning, he electrified the congregation with his mastery of the English language...He had us on our feet.”⁷⁹

Taylor became politically active right away. Less than a year in, he was nominated to serve on the local school board.⁸⁰ Soon after, he became just the second African American to serve on the citywide Board of Education. Later, he served as a member of the Commission for Integrated Schools. For a time, he also chaired the Democratic Party in King’s County, one of the most powerful county organizations in the United States at that time (after Cook County in Chicago).⁸¹ As was stated before, many black pastors in Brooklyn were Republican. Historian Clarence Taylor observes that Taylor “was one of the few Democrats among the active black clergy in Brooklyn. Taylor became the most noted black minister in the Democratic Party.”⁸² Taylor attended civil rights functions at Abyssinian for his friend Adam Clayton Powell Jr., also a Democrat, and he supported Powell, even in disagreement, during the Eisenhower re-election controversy.⁸³

In the late 1950s and 1960s, Taylor was arrested several times for his participation in civil rights demonstrations along with other clergy.⁸⁴ Supporters encouraged Taylor to run for office as his church grew larger and his influence expanded. However, so the story goes, he refused to run

⁷⁴ Gerald Lamont Thomas, *African American Preaching: The Contribution of Dr. Gardner C. Taylor* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 96.

⁷⁵ Gardner C. Taylor, *The Words of Gardner Taylor: NBC Radio Sermons, 1959-1970*, ed. Edward L. Taylor, vol. 1 (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2004), 4.

⁷⁶ Timothy George, “Introduction: Honor to Whom Honor Is Due,” in *Our Sufficiency Is of God: Essays on Preaching in Honor of Gardner C. Taylor*, ed. Timothy George, James Earl Massey, and Robert Smith Jr. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2010), xiv.

⁷⁷ Ibid., xiv.

⁷⁸ Thomas, *African American Preaching*, 98.

⁷⁹ “Interview with Gardner C. Taylor,” in Thomas, *African American Preaching*, 98.

⁸⁰ “Concord Pastor Sworn in as School Board Member,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 7, 1949, 7.

⁸¹ Taylor, *The Words of Gardner Taylor*, 1:5.

⁸² Taylor, *Black Churches of Brooklyn*, 118.

⁸³ Referring to attempts to discipline Powell after the Eisenhower spectacle, Hamilton writes, “The Reverend Gardner C. Taylor of New York joined a group from that city in telegrams to the New York political leaders saying: ‘The Negro community may not agree with Congressman Powell but will look upon this as an anti-Negro move.’ They threatened retaliation at the polls in future elections.” See Hamilton, *Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.*, 277.

⁸⁴ McFadden writes: “In New York, Mr. Taylor organized civil rights marches and was arrested three times in the 1960s.” Robert D. McFadden, “Rev. Gardner C. Taylor, Powerful Voice for Civil Rights, Dies at 96 (Obituary),” *New York Times*, April 6, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/07/us/rev-gardner-c-taylor-powerful-voice-for-civil-rights-dies-at-96.html>.

after his wife Laura Scott Taylor told him his preaching was “getting very thin.”⁸⁵ Like Ray and unlike Powell, Taylor decided *not* to go into politics. He believed he could “make a greater difference in the lives of his people through his ministry of influence as their pastor.”⁸⁶

On October 2, 1952, Taylor faced one of his biggest challenges when Concord’s sanctuary was destroyed in a fire. Some thought it was a freak accident while others believed it was outdated electrical wiring. On one night, Concord went from being a large, successful church to being homeless. However, within days, fifteen Protestant churches and leaders of other faiths not only offered their condolences and prayers; they also provided financial support to help rebuild.⁸⁷ When the church was denied a loan by the local bank, Taylor advised all members who were customers there to withdraw their funds, and they did.⁸⁸ At a meeting in his home shortly after the fire, Taylor said, “We are going to go forward because I have a community of baptized believers who believe in me and in what I have said in the four years of my preaching here and with them and their faith in God and my leadership, we cannot fail.”⁸⁹ When the church broke ground on July 19, 1953, Ray was one of the guest preachers.⁹⁰ On April 1, 1956, the people of Concord marched into their \$1.7 million facility at 833 Marcy Avenue with great celebration. Again, Ray was a guest preacher.⁹¹

Taylor’s star continued to rise from 1958 to 1960. At his ten-year anniversary at Concord in 1958, the local newspaper described him as a “born leader” who “towered as a giant” in the rebuilding of his church, one who held “esteem among his members and the citizens of Brooklyn and New York.”⁹² In 1958, he became the first black president of the Protestant Council of Churches in New York.⁹³ In 1959, he became the first African American to participate in the NBC radio pulpit broadcasts joining Sockman, Scherer, and Fosdick.⁹⁴ He befriended each of these older pastors and gained from his friendships with them during this time period.⁹⁵ By January 1960, Concord counted 13,500 people among its membership, a net growth of 8,500 in a twelve-year span.

Although the years after 1960 are beyond the scope of this article, at least a few post-1960 highlights are worthy of mention. After 1960, Taylor’s ministry at Concord continued to prosper. In addition to his vibrant preaching ministry, he and his wife established the Concord Elementary School for grades 1–6. Drawing no salary, his wife served with distinction as the school’s principal for thirty-two years. Concord also oversaw the construction of a 121-bed nursing home, a seniors’ residence, and a credit union with assets exceeding \$1.8 million. Toward the end of his tenure at Concord, Taylor established the “Christfund Endowment” for African American children and community uplift in Brooklyn, and he remained socially and politically active.⁹⁶

A personal friend of King Sr. (“Daddy King”), Taylor supported and raised money for King Jr. and the Civil Rights movement throughout the 1950s and 1960s. He counted “Mike” a close

⁸⁵ George, “Introduction: Honor to Whom Honor Is Due,” xv.

⁸⁶ Ibid., xv.

⁸⁷ “Aid Offered to Church,” *New York Times*, October 4, 1952, 12.

⁸⁸ Thomas, *African American Preaching*, 99.

⁸⁹ Ibid., “Interview with Anna Belle.”

⁹⁰ “To Break Ground for New Church,” *New York Times*, July 18, 1953, 14.

⁹¹ Daphne Sheppard, “2,800 at Concord Dedication Service,” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 7, 1956, 19.

⁹² “Taylor Completes Decade at Concord,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 31, 1958, 20.

⁹³ “Dr. Gardner Taylor Heads NYC Protestant Council,” *New Journal and Guide*, February 15, 1958, C15.

⁹⁴ “Dr. Taylor on Radio Pulpit for 13 Weeks,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 27, 1959, 25.

⁹⁵ Taylor preached intermittently for NBC religious radio programs from 1959 to 1970.

⁹⁶ Taylor discusses the vision and work of the Christfund Endowment in Taylor, *The Words of Gardner Taylor*, 5:71.

friend. Their families vacationed together.⁹⁷ In 1960 and again in 1961, Taylor ran for the presidency of the National Baptist Convention (NBC). He lost the election to then-president J. H. Jackson amidst a swirl of controversy, denominational in-fighting, violence, and accusations of an unfair process and vote count in the election. In the months after the 1960 election, both Taylor in New York and Jackson in Chicago claimed to be the duly elected president of the NBC. After the election of 1961, the denomination split primarily over the matter of presidential tenure. When L. Venchael Booth founded the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC), both Taylor and King offered their support.⁹⁸ Taylor served as the second president of the PNBC (1966-1969). At his insistence, the PNBC invited King to speak to delegates at their annual meeting in 1966. Taylor retired from Concord in 1990 after serving forty-two years as the church's pastor. He died in 2015.

Conclusion

If you have not heard of Taylor, Ray, or Powell, then you are not alone. Little attention is paid to them in books on the history of preaching. In his 870-page *A History of Preaching*, O. C. Edwards devotes three pages to Taylor, Powell gets one sentence, and Ray is not mentioned.⁹⁹ In Hughes Oliphant Old's seven-volume work, Taylor and Powell get two sentences and Ray is not mentioned.¹⁰⁰

At one level, this article highlights the biographies of Powell, Ray, and Taylor to center the stories of three "hidden figures" who do not appear in most of the historical accounts of Protestant preaching in the United States. In doing so, it creates opportunities for readers to learn more about names that are not as familiar in academic circles. At another level, this article reveals the assumptions that are often made whenever preaching's history is written about or discussed in academic guilds. What does one *mean* by preaching's history, and how does one mean it? Do those doing the history interrogate their assumptions about which histories are most important to re-tell? Do they offer non-innocent accounts? Do they explore unexcavated histories?

No doubt Lawrence concludes rightly that Sundays in New York in the mid-twentieth century were sacrosanct in the churches of Fosdick, Buttrick, Scherer, and Sockman. Even so, this article offers a much-needed reminder that Sundays were also sacrosanct in the churches of Powell, Ray, and Taylor. These pastor-preachers received less recognition than their counterparts despite

⁹⁷ In a 2008-interview, Taylor claims: "[King] and I vacationed in this country and in Jamaica and Puerto Rico, and once in Brazil." See "Gardner Calvin Taylor: Oral History Memoir, Interview 2," Interview by Joel C. Gregory, Baylor University Institute for Oral History, March 17, 2008, 15.

⁹⁸ See William D. Booth, *A Call to Greatness: The Story of the Founding of the Progressive National Baptist Convention* (Lawrenceville, VA: Brunswick, 2001). Taylor and King did not offer their support initially. At first, they both tried to preserve ties with the National Baptist Convention. For more on Taylor and King's initial reluctance, see C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 37; Booth, *A Call to Greatness*, 11; Lewis Baldwin, *The Voice of Conscience: The Church in the Mind of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 177–78.

⁹⁹ O.C. Edwards, *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 714–16, 721. To be fair to Edwards, his summary of Taylor's preaching ministry is part of a larger chapter entitled, "A Homiletical Epiphany: The Emergence of African American Preaching in Majority Consciousness," starting on p. 703.

¹⁰⁰ Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church: Our Own Time*, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 356, 360, 367, 385. To Oliphant Old's credit, he devotes a chapter to black preaching in vol. 7 and to black preaching's origins in vol. 6. He also writes about preachers such as T. D. Jakes. I am not suggesting that Edwards or Old were willfully or strategically neglectful of minoritized preaching in the United States or abroad but, rather, asserting that on account of the absence of these hidden figures from preaching history books, the risk remains high that their legacies will be neglected or, worse yet, forgotten. The work of historical recovery is critical to offering more accurate and faithful historical accounts.

playing major roles in the preaching renaissance in the city. Indeed, one cannot understand the renaissance rightly without shining a brighter spotlight on Sundays in East New York.