



URBAN CURRENT

Against the tide

Son of slaves, African American father, Cherokee mother, he read the Gospel of John 20 times before he was ten years old. At age 20, the testimony of Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. was, “all I could make and borrow was sacrificed to the demon of gambling which possessed me soul and body.” In that condition, he attended a Baptist revival meeting and was converted. Three years later, he was seized with an unquenchable desire to preach. Having been in pursuit of a law degree, he says, “My mind was suddenly and completely turned from the law to the Gospel.”

Pastoring two churches in the 16-year period previous, he received a call in 1908 to the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City.

Abyssinian was founded in 1808. A group of black parishioners left First Baptist Church of New York due to segregated seating. Reverend Thomas Paul, an African American minister from Boston, assisted the group of African Americans and Ethiopian immigrants in establishing Abyssinian, after Abyssinia, the ancient name of Ethiopia. Abyssinian became the first African American Baptist church in the state of New York.

Arriving in New York City, Powell discovered an enthusiastic minority opposed his call telling him the former pastor had not had a square deal. They wanted him back. Several weeks later, a church meeting was to name the pastor’s salary and arrange for Powell’s installation. It was rumored a woman of the aforementioned minority would make a motion to petition a court for an injunction restraining Powell from being installed. She was a faithful influential member of the church.

The Saturday before the meeting, she suffered what seemed to be a paralytic stroke. She never regained consciousness. She died Sunday and was buried Tuesday. No other minister could be procured. Powell was asked to conduct the service.

Powell writes in his autobiography, *Against*

the Tide, “The superstitious thought that this was an act of God. I do not know but I know it had the same effect. The church meeting was all harmony. Not a hand was raised or a voice lifted against the proposed program.”

The church was located in the city’s red light district. Prostitutes lined the curb after services soliciting the men of the congregation. Powell immediately announced he would preach every night in January. By January 20, under constant Gospel bombardment, the neighborhood began to crack. Pimps, prostitutes, keepers of dives, and gambling dens were drawn to the meetings, confessed conversion, and were baptized. Numerous death threats were made against the pastor. The church persisted and succeeded at least in forcing the street trade into private quarters.

Powell was often called to conduct citywide evangelistic campaigns. One effort in 1909 in Indianapolis was described by the *Christian Banner*, “... Churches ... came together in one great soul-saving effort. Citizens of both races testified it was the largest and most helpful revival of religion ever witnessed in that part of the country ...”

William H. Farris described Powell’s sermons as, “He preached eloquent sermons, real sermons that people said had life and fire.”

Former pastors had tried to move the congregation to Harlem, but Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. convinced the congregation to move and build. In 1920, they purchased the property. Crowds estimated up to 50,000 clogged streets and vacant lots to attend the laying of the cornerstone.

The edifice that rose under Powell’s vision was like no other a congregation of color had built anywhere in the country. Gothic and Tudor design, constructed of New York bluestone, the front and rear windows of European art glass were among the largest and most beautiful in the United States. The 2,000 seating capacity was centered on a white, Italian marble pulpit.

During the year, about 1,000 members were added bringing the membership to 2,000. The building committee expected it would require at least two years to build up Sunday morning attendance to 2,000. In the year following the dedication, the morning audience never fell below that number.

A young Dietrich Bonhoeffer arrived in New York City to attend seminary. He observed, “In New York, they preach about virtually everything; only one thing is not addressed or is addressed so rarely that I have as yet been able to hear it, namely, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the cross, sin and forgiveness, death and life.”

Eric Metaxes writes in *Bonhoeffer, Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, “Bonhoeffer was invited by a fellow student to Dr. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr.’s Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. This New York preacher was unashamed of the Gospel, proclaiming the saving power of Jesus and living the Gospel out in community impact and city-wide influence. Powell combined the fire of a revivalist preacher with great intellect and social vision.”

He later reflected that any value he experienced in New York was due to his experiences in the “Negro churches.”

Developing outreach ministries, Powell saw the membership swell to 14,000. Abyssinian was the largest evangelical congregation in the country. He would shepherd this flock till 1936.

Jim Crow ruled the south. The north wasn’t exactly friendly. New York City was its own hostile force. The Great Depression hit the black community with special ferocity. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. led a Gospel charge against the tide.

Here is the adventure! Here is the drama! Here is faith! Here are the miracles. Through history the greatest work for God has been against the tide! Now it’s our turn.

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