



Dr. Howard O. Jones

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Pioneer Evangelist

by Daphne Myers

"It's an awareness that you're a living test, a human experiment. It's knowing that your every word, your every action, has the potential to either make or break the hopes of your race."

A pioneer is one who leads the way, who pushes open the door for others to follow. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and Jackie Robinson made decisions that changed the way society thought and set a better course for future generations.

Add to this list of trailblazers Dr. Howard O. Jones. Dr. Jones pushed through a major color barrier in Christianity when he joined the Billy Graham evangelistic crusades and became the first African American on Graham's team. It is important to remember this happened in the early 1950s, before the major civil rights movement in the United States. Racism lifted its ugly head even in the Christian community. When Howard joined Graham's staff some supporters refused to continue funding the ministry, but Graham knew what God called him to do and he refused to back down. Despite the discrimination, Howard also refused to stop what he felt God had called him to do.

Howard was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1921 to a family who attended church faithfully. But it was his girlfriend Wanda (who eventually became his wife) who was responsible for him making a commitment to Christ. While in high school she made a personal commitment to follow the Lord. Prior to her conversion, Wanda dated Howard but she began refusing their dates, saying, "I cannot go out with someone who is not a Christian."

Eventually Howard made his own commitment to the Lord, but he still wanted a career as a musician: "I wanted to become the next big name in jazz music." Eventually he and his brother formed a professional jazz band. As God began to deal with Howard, however, he gave up the band and resolved to give his gifts to the Lord.

After high school, he and Wanda both attended Nyack College in New York. Nyack was a predominately white Bible school and Howard and Wanda were two of 12 African-American students among 600 white students, most of them from the South. They were disrespected, watched closely, and discouraged from going to the mission field. While they did not then go overseas, they felt they eventually helped the student body and staff adopt a more biblical view of missions rather than a racial one.

After their graduation, Howard married Wanda in 1944 and became pastor of Bethany Christian Missionary Alliance Church in Harlem, where he also preached on the radio. Then came six years as pastor of Smoot Memorial Christian Missionary Alliance Church back in Cleveland.

Howard's church was invited to send recordings of Negro spirituals to a radio station in Liberia. The station also invited Howard to preach on the radio and lead a three-month evangelistic crusade in Liberia, Ghana, and Nigeria—the first black clergyman to do so. He was returning to Cleveland when Graham asked him to help integrate a crusade at Madison Square Garden in New York.

Howard told Graham to take his crusade to the streets, and they did, preaching in Harlem and the Bronx to huge audiences that included many minorities. For the next year Howard and Wanda fasted about his becoming full-time in the Graham organization until they felt the Lord said this was what He wanted them to do.

While the New York crusade was a success, Howard faced discrimination at crusades elsewhere. "I remember sitting on the crusade platform on various occasions," Howard said, "with empty seats next to me because some white crusade participants had decided to sit on the other side of the stage. The stares, the people muttering under their voices. In the crusades there were nights when it was palpable." He would go back to his hotel room and weep, saying, "Lord, I can't take this pressure."

But Howard persevered, helping to prepare crusades and leading some himself. In 1961 alone, he led crusades in Philadelphia, Liberia, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Kenya. His three daughters sang at a number of the crusades and the Jones Sisters became a well-known singing group.

For 35 years, from 1958 to 1993, he led an Hour of Freedom radio show that was broadcast widely in the U.S. and Africa. From 1960 to 1966, he and his family lived in Liberia. He ministered via radio while Wanda led a women's devotional group.

Overseas, Howard led spiritual and humanitarian drives, such as raising \$80,000 for famine relief in Africa. Rev. Ralph Bell, an associate of Graham recruited by Howard, said, "[He] played a strong role in showing Billy the importance of meeting physical needs as well as the spiritual."

In addition to his work with Graham, Howard served as the first president of the National Black Evangelical Association (NBEA) and was the first African American named to the National Religious Broadcasters' Hall of Fame.

In the 1970s, Howard stood by his wife when he was forced to place her in a nursing home the latter part of her life. He faithfully visited and ministered to her daily until her death in 2001. Howard died Nov. 14, 2010, at age 89.

A few years before he died, Howard said, "The greatest need for Christians today is a moral and spiritual awakening, but I don't think we're going to see an outpouring of the Holy Spirit like we need until the church comes to grips with its race problem, because Jesus said, 'By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, because you love one another.'"



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