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The Need for a Black Christian Theology

Black Theology is a systematic interpretation of the meaning and significance of the Christian Faith for the worshipping, witnessing, and proclaiming Black Christian community. It seeks to analyze the condition of the Black man in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Its purpose is one of creating a new understanding of the dignity of Black men and women as children of God. Black Theology is Christian Theology precisely because it utilizes God's revelation in Jesus Christ as its point of departure and also as a norm for the interpretation of the meaning and significance of human existence. Black Theology is a theology of, by, and for black people which has come out of their experience in America. It is a way of looking at God, the life and the teaching of Jesus Christ, self, and the world in the light of the Black Experience. Black theology emerged as a reaction against the so-called classical theologies which have been unable to realistically and authentically relate to the theological implications of the black experience; it is a *reaction* to the refusal of white theologians to come to grips with the theology of the disadvantaged, the disenfranchised and of the oppressed. Black theology, in essence, affirms the centrality of the Scriptures. In this affirmation it calls for reinterpretation of the Scriptures, whereby they can be seen not only as supporting the struggles for justice, freedom, and human dignity in times past, but also as a norm for the same endeavors in times present and for all times to come.

What do white American and European theologians of a white racist dominated religious establishment know about the soul of black folks? What do Barth, Brunner and Tillich know about the realities of the black ghettos or the fate of black sharecroppers' families whose souls are crushed by the powerful forces of a society that considers everything black as evil? Could these white theologians see the image of the crucified Lord in the mutilated face of a rat bitten child, or a drug addict, bleeding to death in a stinking alley?

We have learned that the interpretation of christian theology and of Jesus Christ espoused by white American theologians is severely limited. These white scholars have never been lowered into the depth of the black experience of reality. They never conceived Jesus Christ walking the dark streets of the ghettos of the north and the sharecroppers' farms in the deep south without a job, busted, and emasculated. These white theologians could never hear the voice of Jesus Christ speaking in the dialect of blacks from the southern farms, or in the idiom of the blacks of the ghetto. This severe limitation of the white theologians' ability to articulate the full meaning of the Christian faith has given rise to the development of black theology.

White theologians did not appreciate nor understand the "soul" ex-

pressed in the religion of the black man — his religious style, warmth, compassion, practical wisdom, artistic and emotional freedom. What is the meaning of the word “soul” within the context of the black christian experience”? Soul is the strength to survive in a hostile environment; to break through the legal and social conventions which tend to dehumanize and degrade. Soul is the ability to use creatively the destructive powers of a racist American society for the development of a tough faith, an undying hope, and unconquerable love. Soul is power that has its source in one’s self and God; a power which gives one strength to survive a thousand calvaries and to rise out of the social and ideological graves into which one has been cast. Soul is life — an abundant life — a life that is able to weave into its fabric the diverse threads of human existence into some meaningful and harmonious pattern.

Soul is love, a strong rugged and victorious love; a love that can endure the thousand and one shocks that life is heir to; a love as strong as steel and yet as gentle as a mother’s touch. Soul is victory born in the bosom of defeat, yet triumphant in and through it; a victory which overcomes and outlasts the world; a victory that triumphs over death, hell, and the grave. Soul is freedom, freedom to express one’s self, restrained only by God’s purpose and Christ’s love. It is the freedom to be “me,” to accept one’s self as a distinctive and unique part of God’s creation. It is the freedom to live in union with the man Jesus, to grow in his likeness, to be rooted and grounded in his love and to mature in his fellowship. The white theologians’ style of life which is structured, ordered, unfeeling, scientific and objective did not equip him with the tools or the capacity to enter into the warm and vibrant world of the religious experience of the black man.

The Commission on Theology of the National Committee of Black Churchmen has issued a statement on Black Theology. In this document, black theology is defined:

“For us, Black Theology is the theology of black liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of black humanity. Black Theology is a theology of “blackness.” It is the affirmation of black humanity that emancipates black people from white racism thus providing authentic freedom for both white and black people. It affirms the humanity of white people in that it says “No” to the encroachment of white oppression.”

The black scholars are indebted in a measure to white theologians. They have learned much from them. However, the white theologians in their interpretation of the Christian faith have ignored the black Christian experience. Many have felt that this black Christian experience was devoid of meaning and therefore could be omitted in their exposition and interpretation of the Christian faith. To be sure, this was a grievous error. The omission of the black Christian experience by white interpreters of the Christian faith meant that the message of the Christian

faith thus interpreted was oriented toward the white community and therefore this message had nothing significant to say to the black man who is now struggling for identity and dignity.

Black theology is deeply rooted in the Holy Scriptures, and especially in that section, the New Testament, which contains God's supreme disclosure in Jesus of Nazareth. It is informed by the best in biblical and historical criticism, church history, history of Christian thought, and the great theological systems of the past and present. Black theology reflects an intimate knowledge of black history and culture, black literature and music, contemporary sociology, psychology, and history, black poetry, and the more significant writings of recent black protest thought. Black theology is corrective and seeks to fulfill that which has been lacking in the major theological systems of our day. It addresses itself to the situation of the black man today which is white racism. James Baldwin describes the situation of American life today as: "some great, great, great wound (which) is in the whole body, and no one dares to operate: to close it, to examine it, to stitch it."¹ The black theologian dares to operate, seeks to examine, to close, to stitch it, and from his efforts, strives to bring healing and liberation to black Americans and the nation.

The methodology of black theology is determined by the specific and unique task of black theology, namely, to explicate the meaning and value of the Christian faith for black Americans who are the victims of oppression in this white American racist society. The black theologian must interpret the nature and the meaning of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of the oppressed blacks so as to demonstrate that this gospel will minister to the community of the oppressed. Black theology begins with the existential situation in which oppressed blacks exist and seeks to determine the message of Christian gospel in this situation of oppression.

THE NEED FOR A NEW INTERPRETATION OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

One white perceptive theologian, Kyle Haselden, has observed that

"The white man cleaves Christian piety into two parts: the strong, virile virtues he applies exclusively to himself; the apparently weak, passive virtues he endorses especially for the Negro. 'Whatsoever things are true, honest, just, pure, lovely' belong to the white man; 'whatsoever things are of good report' belong to the Negro. The white man takes the active and positive Christian adjectives for himself: noble, manly, wise, strong, courageous; he recommends the passive and negative Christian adjectives to the Negro: patient, long-suffering, humble, self-effacing, considerate, submissive, childlike, meek."²

¹ Margaret Mead and James Baldwin, "A Rap on Race," (J. B. Lipincott Co., Philadelphia and New York: 1971), p. 3

² Kyle Haselden, "The Racial Problem in Christian Perspective. Harper Brothers: New York, 1959, pp. 42-43

White theology has not presented blacks with good theological reasons why they should not speak out against this gross perversion of the Christian faith. White theology has not been able to re-shape the life of the white church so as to cleanse it of its racism and to liberate it from the iron claws of the white racist establishment of this nation. White theology has presented the blacks a religion of contentment in the state of life in which they find themselves. Such an interpretation of the Christian faith avoided questions about personal dignity, collective power, freedom, equality and self-determination. The white church establishment presented to the black people a religion carefully tailored to fit the purposes of the white oppressors, corrupted in language, interpretation and application by the conscious and unconscious racism of white Christians from the first plantation missionary down to Billy Graham.

The great paradox in the black man's religious experience is that he embraced the Christian faith. In the providence of God the Christian gospel was held before the eyes of the black man. He saw himself not as a contented manageable thing designed to serve a superior white man. He saw in the mirror of the Christian gospel the true image of himself, the image of a man. He saw himself as a person the one for whom Christ had died and thereby possessing the dignity and rights of the liberated man. The black man ploughed into the Scriptures for himself and though limited in training and deficient in language he wrestled with the word of God with prayers, songs and total self. He attacked the source of knowledge believing that if he asked he would be given the answers about the deep things of God and of man; if he knocked the doors of wisdom and knowledge would be open to him; if he would seek he would discover that priceless truth on which his life depended.

The question must be asked, what were the causes which moved the black man beyond his primitive mystic to the creation of a new type and a new kind of religious expression. Why did he not continue the beating out of the complex rhythm on tom toms and drums while he uttered his cries of desperation and hopefulness. We believed that at the precise time, the psychological time there was fused into the vestiges of the African music the spirit of the Christian faith. The blacks had been introduced to a perverted and distorted interpretation of the Christian faith and this Christian faith though imperfectly presented was discovered to be by the blacks the precise religion for the conditions in which they found themselves. Far from their native land, customs and traditions; despised, brutalized, degraded and slaughtered by those among whom they lived, separated from their loved ones on the auction block, experiencing the cruelty and unmercifulness of a psychotic slave master, the black man embraced the Christian faith and interpreted it to be a religion of liberation and compensation. For the black man the Christian faith was a religion of reversal of conditions of the rich and the poor, the proud and the meek, of master and servant. It was this

interpretation of the Christian faith which produced a body of songs which gave voice to all of the basic virtues of the Christian faith — faith, hope, love, courage, freedom, emancipation, liberation and victory. The black spirituals are songs of liberation. They expressed faith in God the All Sufficient one who saved Daniel from the lion's den, preserved the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace, and liberated the Jews out of bondage in Egypt. It was this faith that enabled the black man to survive physically and spiritually more than 300 years of slavery, and more than 100 years of second class citizenship since the Emancipation Proclamation.

One wonders why this new, original and novel interpretation of the Christian faith was not appreciated, recognized and embraced by the white church establishment and the theological schools of this nation.

This new and fresh interpretation of the Christian faith which came out of the life and witness of the black community was more or less overlooked, ignored and judged illegitimate and subhuman by the white establishment of this nation. The reasons for this judgment of the white establishment is rather obvious. To elevate and articulate the Black Christian experience by white theological technicians would have inevitably resulted in the elevation and appreciation of the Black Americans who produced this new interpretation of the Christian faith. It would further have meant that the Black man in America would have to be glorified culturally and elevated socially and economically. The Black preacher and the Black community would have to be accepted on a new level. The white American cultural ego would not permit this. At the very bottom of this, one will discover the realities and depth of racism. It is a racism which expresses itself in opposition, exploitation, exclusion and segregation; all geared to support the false ideology of white supremacy.

The acceptance of the Christian Faith by Blacks required the surmounting of the offense of the corruption and distortion of the faith by the white theological establishment. The scandal and offense of the twentieth century for Black Americans is that the white church establishment would promote segregation and discrimination; and do this in the name of God; that the white theological establishment would develop a theology that ignored the black presence and the Black experience and at the same time claim to be universal and all inclusive; that the names of God and Jesus Christ would be used to bless the carnival of slaughter and enslavement of Black men; that God's will was as thought to be synonymous with the will of the white racists; that God had created an inferior race to serve the master white race; that God had given the white man the authority to exploit the poor and the wretched of the earth; that God had condemned to eternal damnation peoples of color and that this God is the Christian God was both an offense and a scandal to blacks. The faith of the Black man had to overcome this offense and scandal of theological thinking about the

nature of God.

To overcome the offense of the 20th century black Americans were assisted by new interpreters of the Christian faith — the emergence of black theologians. Martin Luther King, Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, James Cone, Joseph Washington, Deotis Roberts forced the black theologians to ask a whole new set of questions about the Christian faith and the interpretation of this faith by the white theological establishment of this nation. Is it possible to interpret the Christian faith adequately and ignore the fact of blackness; the black presence and the black experience? What is the relevance of the interpretation of God, Jesus Christ and man for black liberation and freedom in the theological systems of Barth, Brunner, Tillich? What are the priorities one will discover when he examines critically the mission and message of Jesus Christ? What were the causes which were championed by Jesus Christ with such a commitment that the misunderstanding of his disciples, the opposition of the political establishment, the sufferings and death of Calvary could not turn him around?

With his mind set, the black theologians have searched the Scriptures, examined the traditions, evaluated the theological systems and have presented to the world under the title "black theology" a new and revolutionary interpretation of the Christian faith.

One of the peculiar advantages available in Christianity was that it provided a ready-made culture and a ready-made tradition for a people who had been brutally separated from their own. The Christian God was active in history. He involved himself in human affairs. He delivered Israel from bondage. Were the black slaves themselves not in the hands of Pharaoh, and would not God deliver them? If God was just and if God was merciful, if God was on the side of the oppressed, then must not they be the chosen of God? Who else could better qualify! The germ of an idea was sown; an idea that was destined to reach theological refinement in the apologia of the black revolution in the sixties and the development of black theology in the seventies.

The black Christians identified themselves as the people of God, but they did not attempt to substitute the history and the traditions of the Jews for their own. Like the Jews, they chose God and conceived themselves as chosen by God because of their understanding of the nature of the love of God and the character of his righteous justice. While there have been some minor cults which found the appropriation of a synthetic Jewish culture less anxiety-producing than the search for, of the development of their own, mainline black Christianity pursued a singular development which eschewed the easy make-believe of the black cultists and confounded the expectations of white Protestantism as well. The theology they fashioned was not the theology they received, for the theology had been comprised in the sin of slavery. An attempt to make its tortured morality prescriptive for the conduct of Christian slaves owned by Christian masters sacrificed whatever moral and spiri-

tual validity it might have possessed. By contrast, black theology was from its inception the theology of liberation, bringing good news to the poor in spirit and freedom to the oppressed — which, it seems to me, is what true Christianity was always intended to do.

THE NEED FOR A NEW CHRISTOLOGY

The need for the development of a theology which addresses itself to the peculiar situation of the black man's existence in America is evident when one considers the interpretation and understanding of Jesus Christ which has been projected by the white theological establishment. Jesus Christ has become for the white church establishment the "white Christ," blue eyes, sharp nose, straight hair, and in the image of the Black man's oppressor. The tragedy of this presentation of Jesus Christ by the white church establishment is that he has been too often identified with the repressive and oppressive forces of the prevailing society. The teachings of the "white Christ" have been used to justify wars, discrimination, segregation, prejudice, and the exploitation of the poor and the oppressed people of the world. In the name of this "white Christ" the most vicious form of racism has been condoned and supported. The image of this "white Christ" has prevailed to the extent that the black, brown or red people of the world, who accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, were denied full Christian fellowship in the white church establishment and were neither accepted nor recognized by it.

The black man's introduction to this "white Christ" was a catastrophe. Vincent Harding reminded us that the black encountered the American "white Christ" first on the slave ships that brought them to these shores. The blacks on the slave ships heard the name of this "white Christ" sung in hymns of praise while they died, chained in stinking holes beneath the decks, and locked in terror and disease. Those blacks who leaped from the decks of the slave ships saw Christ's name carved on the side of the ship. When black women were raped in the ships' cabins by white men, they must have noticed the Holy Bibles on the shelves.

The "white Christ" of the white church establishment is the enemy of the black man and this accounts for the quest for the black Jesus which has engaged the attention of some black scholars recently. The black preachers and scholars were compelled to present a new interpretation of Jesus Christ and his teachings. They were forced to look at the teachings of Jesus Christ in the light of their own black Christian experience and discover what these said about the realities of their own lives. The task of the black scholar was clear. If Bultmann's task was to demythologize the New Testament, then the black scholars had to detheologize their minds of the racist ideas which had crept into their interpretations of Jesus Christ, and to see and understand him in the depth of his full humanity.

The central and creative force in the Christian life and witness is Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew. The early Christians believed that in Jesus' life and teachings, death and resurrection, God made his final and decisive revelation to man. Men of all races were able to discover God and felt his presence in the person, word, spirit, life and deed of Jesus Christ. The belief in Jesus Christ as God's revelation to the world and to men became the nucleus around which the Christian community developed and the source of its ideas about life and ultimate reality. The Christological titles in the New Testament are expressive of what men found in the life of this man Jesus. The members of the early Christian community believed that in the life of this man Jesus, man's deepest needs are met, man's ultimate concerns are satisfied, and man's disturbing questions are answered. Men of all races could turn to Jesus Christ and see in his life — reflections of themselves. Man's ultimate question, "Who and where is God and what is he doing," was answered in Jesus Christ.

The basic problem which confronts black Americans today in their redundant quest for liberation and human dignity is racism. In order to discover a solution to this problem, one must understand what Jesus Christ, God's ultimate revelation in human form, has to say about it, and how his message has been woven into the black Christian experience. The need for an interpretation of the meaning and significance of Jesus Christ for the black Christian community is urgent and necessary. It is necessary in the sense that the interpretations of Jesus Christ by white scholars are conditioned by their own commitments to the communities, secular and Christian, that have fashioned and shaped their lives. The interpretations of Jesus Christ and his meaning for religious living that were given by Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Rudolf Bultmann, and Wolfhart Pannenberg reflect not only their individual analysis of the documents of the New Testament and their competence in the areas of the history of Christian thought and philosophy, but also their biases and the biases of the Christian communities out of which these scholars grew and emerged. Their interpretations of the meaning of Jesus Christ and his significance for religious living were addressed to these communities. There is a dire need for an interpretation of Jesus Christ which has emerged out of the black witnessing Christian community, and this is for many reasons. Many blacks, especially the young intellectuals, have rejected the stereotyped interpretations of Jesus Christ which have been tailored and fashioned by the theological technicians who did not appreciate the black Christian experience and did not share the hopes and aspirations of the young blacks today. Blacks who reject this "white Christ" are not only convinced of his irrelevancy and unauthenticity, but also that the Christian Faith no longer has its saving word for them.

It is the conviction of many black theologians, however, that the Jesus Christ presented in the Four Gospels of the New Testament is

relevant and does speak a saving, liberating word by deed and event to and for the aspirations of the black Christian community today. Today black men are not concerned basically about survival, but about liberation. It is believed by many black theologians that the interpretation of Jesus Christ which made possible black survival is not the interpretation needed by the black man today as he struggles for liberation and human dignity. Jesus Christ as the embodiment of patience, forbearance, long-suffering, forgiveness, non-violence, and submissiveness no longer appeals to the blacks today. Whereas these characteristics are certainly to be found in Jesus Christ as he is revealed in the Four Gospels, there are other attributes of this same Jesus Christ which must now come to the forefront if he is to have for this generation of blacks and whites the saving and liberating word.

It is believed by many black theologians that liberation and reconciliation were the aims and the goal of the life of Jesus in the world. Liberation and reconciliation express the essential thrust of his ministry. The stage of his ministry was the streets. His congregation consisted of those who were written off by the state. He ministered to those who needed him, "the nobodies of the world," the sick, the blind, the lame and the demon possessed. He invaded the chambers of sickness and death and hallowed these with the healing words of health and life. He invaded the minds of the demon possessed and in those dark chambers of the night he brought light, sanity and order. Jesus ministered to men in their sorrow, sin and degradation and offered them hope and light and courage and strength. He offered comfort to the poor who did not fit into the structure of the world. Jesus comforted the mourner and offered hope to the humble. He had a message for the men and women who had been pushed to the limits of human existence and on these he pronounced his blessedness.

The people who received help from Jesus are throughout the Gospels on the fringe of society — men who because of fate, guilt and prejudices were considered marked men; sick people, who must bear their disease as punishment for crime or for some sin committed; demoniacs, that is those possessed of demons; the lepers, the first born of death to whom fellowship was denied; Gentiles, women and children who did not count for anything in the community and the really bad people, the prostitutes, the thieves, the murderers, the robbers. When Jesus was pressed for an explanation of the radicalness of the thrust of his ministry his answer was simple and direct. "Those who are well have no need for a physician but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

The greatness of Jesus is to be found precisely in the way in which he makes himself accessible to those who need him, ignoring conventional limitations and issuing that grand and glorious welcome — "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest."

Through a critical examination of the black Christian experience Jesus Christ is understood to be the Son of man, Son of God, suffering servant, the Logos, the Christ, integrative personality, cosmic mind, unique idea, but more significantly Jesus is the Liberator. Jesus the Liberator is the ghetto bred lad of Nazareth who grew up in the rough and tumble of life. He was acquainted with suffering, pain and anxiety and felt the relentless pressures of oppression and repression. He grew up in the bosom of the world and was therefore acquainted first hand with the relentless conflicts which were the daily experiences of men.

This tough Jesus early in his ministry cast his lot with the weak, oppressed and exploited peoples of the world. The essential thrust of his ministry was one of liberation in which he believed that he had been anointed to preach the gospel to the poor, to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, to give sight to the blind and to give liberty to those who are in chains. He confronted men with God's eternal "Now." Liberation and reconciliation are the two foci of his ministry. He gave men liberty and showed them the path of reconciliation in the world.

Jesus the Liberator is not only the supreme reformer of human nature. He is not merely the physician who heals this and that infected patch of humanity. Jesus the Liberator is not only the rebuildler of waste places. Jesus the Liberator is all of this and more. He is the source and giver of life. In Jesus the Liberator blacks believe that the very creative life of God stepped forth on the human platform to create a new mankind — God's new creation.

Jesus encountered evil as a sinister force and in his every act he reached over and beyond it to deal with the tyrannical powers behind it. There was in Jesus that which constituted a ceaseless assertion of power against the entrenched powers of this world, not merely of truth against power. He attacked bastions of wrong, and his very being and essential selfhood was a decisive offensive against sin, evil and corruption. His mission in the world was militant and revolutionary and designed to change and transform the existing order of things. His own personality was the source of this revolutionary change by which the malignant powers were to be disposed.

In the long range he had come to bring peace, but not before the baptism of conflict and fire. Only after this conflict could he hold out in his bleeding triumphant hands his everlasting gift to the world — peace. Until evil had been conquered and driven from the field and the aggressive and oppressive powers made his footstool, he was and is the militant and revolutionary Jesus, the Liberator.

Jesus, the Liberator and Reconciler entered the world not to merely make a passing visit but to transform and grasp the historical movement and keep it in his hands. We should not lose heart or be discouraged if he is temporarily engulfed by the hatred of men and fastened to a cross. He did so only to conquer the world and return as the victorious and

triumphant one. If for a moment the grave is to claim him, and confine him within its narrow walls, he will free himself through the open door made by God, and come forth shouting: "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades." This is the black man's Liberator, the tough, emancipating, liberating, disturbing, saving Jesus of Nazareth, Lord and Saviour of men.

We are challenged to continue in our world Jesus' ministry of love, liberation and reconciliation. We must recognize that to be a Christian is to be contemporaneous with Jesus the Liberator. To be sure, to be a Christian is not to hold views about Jesus but rather to become a contemporary with Jesus in his ministry of suffering and humiliation and love and liberation. To be a Christian is to be committed to the man Jesus in spite of the world's rejection of him, in spite of Christendom's betrayal of Him, and in spite of the social and intellectual stigma involved in accepting and following him. To be a Christian is to stand with Jesus and participate in his ministry of love and liberation at the crossways of the world where men are crucified on the crosses of poverty, racism, war and exploitation. To be a Christian is to try again to introduce Christianity into Christendom and to set free again the powers of the love and liberating ministry of Jesus the Liberator and Reconciler.

