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## Toward a New Introduction to Christian Theology: Telling the Story

Many people feel that theology is a collection of fancy words and fat sentences that have little to do with the lives of people or the real meaning of Christian faith. Such an impression causes laypersons — and many preachers, too — to ask, “Why bother with theology?”

The answer to the question “Why bother with theology?” is clear when “theology” itself is defined. The term “theology” comes from the Greek words *Theos* (God) and *Logos* (word or reason), so “theology” means word or reason about God. Actually, theology is inseparable from the Christian way of life. Each time a preacher mounts the pulpit to proclaim “Thus saith the Lord,” or a Sunday School teacher confronts her class with words about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or a layperson testifies on Wednesday night concerning the goodness of the God “who brought me from a mighty long way,” they are making theological statements. The theologian merely takes these statements about God and organizes them into a coherent system to make sure that they are in harmony with God’s revelation of himself in the Old and New Testaments. It is in this way that theology helps the Church understand her confession of faith and regulate her mission in the world.

In this essay, I will look briefly at the Old and New Testaments as the foundation for Christian Theology and then outline the development of theology from the patristic age to the recent appearance of Black Theology.

### I. THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS AS THE FOUNDATION FOR CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

The Old and New Testaments are the foundation for Christian theology. They are the source materials that underlie what Christians believe about God. Any interpretation of Christianity, therefore, must be directly related to the Bible.

#### A. *Old Testament*

The Old Testament is the story of Israel’s encounter with the God who discloses himself in historical events. He introduces himself as Almighty, Sovereign, and Mysterious.

The story of God’s dealings with Israel begins with the Exodus from Egypt. God met Moses near Mt. Sinai in the mysterious form of a burning bush. At first Moses, like most of us, wondered how a bush could burn without being consumed. But his attention quickly shifted from seeing the bush to hearing the God who spoke from the bush: “I have

seen the affliction of my people . . . and have heard their cry . . . I know their sufferings, and have come down to deliver them" (Ex. 3:7-8). In this "I and thou" dialogue, God summoned Moses to take part in this divine act of liberation: "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh" (Ex. 3:10).

However, Moses was uneasy about the divine call and offered various protests in an attempt to remain on the comfortable sidelines of history. He complained that if he were to go to the Hebrews in Egypt and convince them of his experience at Sinai, he would have to know God's name (Ex. 4:13). In ancient times this was a vital question, because the character of God was expressed in his name. In Hebraic thought, the name represented the innermost identity of a person and was filled with mysterious power and significance. Moses' question about God's name, then, was an attempt to know the mystery of divine nature.<sup>1</sup>

God Answered Moses: "I AM WHO I AM," instructing Moses to tell the people, "I AM has sent me to you (Ex. 3:14). "I am who I am" is an attempt to translate YHWH (Yahweh), the ancient and most holy name of God (often translated "the Lord" in English Bibles). The name Yahweh suggests not *being* — as in "I am" — but *action* and *causation*. Thus, God was telling Moses in Exodus 3:14: "Say to the people of Israel, 'HE WHO CAUSES THINGS TO HAPPEN' has sent me to you." This meaning of the divine name helps us better to understand God's answer to Moses. Moses had asked for information about the mystery of the divine nature (the name), but received instead the divine demand of obedience and the assurance that he would know who God is by what he brings to pass. That is to say, the question "Who is God?" would be answered in future events brought about by God.

The historical events that reveal who God is took place in Egypt. Moses went to Pharaoh and told him that Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, said "let my people go." When the Egyptian pharaoh refused, God himself intervened on behalf of that helpless band of slaves and after a succession of suspense-filled episodes overcame the Egyptian pharaoh, the mightiest emperor of the day. However, the real power of God was manifested in the episode at the Red Sea. Pharaoh told Moses to take the people and go but changed his mind soon afterward and sent soldiers in hot pursuit after the children of Israel. He overtook them at the Red Sea, and Moses cried to God for directions. God said to Moses: "Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward." Whereupon, the Lord opened a highway through the Red Sea for the people of Israel and when Pharaoh and his army tried to follow, the Lord caused the sea to swallow them up (Ex. 14:15-18).

Thus the people of Israel were liberated from Egyptian bondage by the mighty acts of Yahweh. He continued to be with them as they made their way through the desert to the sacred mountain of Sinai — providing

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<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of the "name of God" see Bernhard Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1966), pp. 38 ff.

food for their hunger, water for their thirst, and a mighty hand for their protection from the enemy.

After the people of Israel reached Sinai, God established with them a covenant. The covenant that was made with them was based upon the deliverance from Egypt and its sequel, the guidance through the desert. God had been carrying his people, just as an eagle lifts its young on its wings, toward this place for a divine purpose:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all people; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:4-6).

Now, the people had to respond. God's initiative placed them in a situation of decision. Whether in fact they would be the people of God depended upon a condition: "If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant." If so they would be Yahweh's "private property," his special community whose ultimate aim was to order its entire life according to God's sovereign demands.

Thus, Israel was converted and created into a new people — the people of God. This story of Israel's beginnings, which governs the whole Old Testament, is the story that provides the data for the Christian understanding of God. Indeed, it is the first layer of the foundation for the development of a Christian theology. Everything we believe about God and his purpose for the world and humankind is related to this story. It is in this manner that it is sacred for the Christian. No statement about God is considered relevant that does not harmonize with this story.

But this story is merely the beginning of God's dealing with his people. The story continues throughout the Old Testament and is finally consummated or fulfilled in the New Testament.

### B. *New Testament*

The New Testament is the story of God in Jesus Christ, reconciling the world unto himself. It is the story of God's reign breaking in upon history — of what God has done, is doing, and will do through a man called Jesus from a place called Nazareth.

In this story an angel of the Lord appears to Mary and tells her that she has found favor with God. He tells her that she will conceive and bear a son, whom she should name Jesus.

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High;  
And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David,  
And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever;  
And of his kingdom there will be no end (Luke 1:32-33).

When Mary questioned the angel concerning this matter in light of the fact that she had no husband, the angel informed her that this was a divine affair and that God himself had already arranged for the Holy Spirit to perform the necessary function for a biological birth and that

the power of the Most High would overshadow her, because this child would be God's own Son.

When Jesus grew into manhood he was baptized by John, whereupon "the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him . . . and a voice came from heaven, 'Thou art my beloved Son; with Thee I am well pleased'" (Luke 3:21-22). Later he went to the synagogue in Nazareth and was asked to read from the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me to preach  
good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the  
captives,  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

Everybody was astonished by the way he read that passage and even more so when he declared: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:16-21).

Jesus went throughout Galilee teaching and preaching about a new age that God was inaugurating, known as the Kingdom of God. He called twelve men to be his closest disciples. They had not only heard him talk about the new age, but they witnessed many miracles that he performed, from healing the sick to raising the dead. After only three short years, Jesus caused such commotion that he was accused of sedition, led before Pilate, and sentenced to die on the cross.

Ordinarily this would be the end of the story (since the disciples had dispersed, denying that they even knew Jesus), except for a strange occurrence three days later. Some women went down to the tomb where they had put Jesus' body and to their utter amazement it was not there. They told the disciples about it and some thought at first that the body was stolen. Later Jesus appeared to them and told them that he had arisen from the dead and that he was returning to heaven. He also informed them that he would not leave them alone, but that in due time he would send the Holy Spirit to continue the work he had started with them. They were to wait together in one place for him.

Sure enough, "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:1-4). From that day forward the disciples went forth armed with the Holy Spirit, threatening to turn the world upside down.

This story provides the final layer of the foundation for Christian theology. All statements about God must be related to this story. The theologian must understand the New Testament as the story of what God has done, is doing, and will do in Jesus Christ and that the Old

Testament salvation story is not only continued but finds its consummation in this story. Jesus himself indicated that his presence on earth was not to abolish but to complete the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 5:17). Indeed, the New Testament affirms throughout that the same God who was with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who was with Moses, Joshua, and David was incarnated in the man from Nazareth. This incarnation was not only a continuation of the past but, more importantly, the inauguration of a completely new age.

The biblical story, then, is the foundation for all future talking or speaking about God. In this light, the task of the theologian is to take the statements which the Church makes about God and organize them into a coherent system to make sure they are in harmony with the story of God's revelation of himself in the Old and New Testaments. This function of theology helps the Church to understand her confession of faith as well as regulate her mission in the world. Theology, though not identical with biblical expressions, has its reasons for being grounded in them. As long as theologians are faithful to these biblical roots, their statements about God may be considered Christian. But when the biblical story is ignored, misinterpreted, or distorted, theologians' statements about God are un-Christian.

## II. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEOLOGY FROM THE PATRISTIC AGE TO THE APPEARANCE OF BLACK THEOLOGY

Christian theology began with the so-called Church Fathers or the patristic age (about 100-600 A.D.). At the beginning of this period Christians were under attack, especially for two things. First, they were accused of being a threat to the Roman Empire. Christianity was supposedly undermining the government. Secondly, Christians were accused, philosophically speaking, of speaking nonsense. Christianity was held to be a superstition mixed with philosophical fragments.

When this double accusation was answered by the Church Fathers, Christian theology was born. Justin Martyr declared that both parts of the accusation were wrong. Far from being dangerous to the Roman Empire, Christians help to prevent the Empire from falling into chaos. They are stronger supporters of world order than the rest of the population. He also contended that Christianity is not nonsense; rather, Christianity is a philosophy that is both certain and adequate. Prominent in Justin's theology is the Logos principle. This Logos is the universal principle of the self-manifestation of God; it was in Jesus Christ in a unique way. Christianity became so universal in Justin's theology that he maintained that all who lived according to the Logos are Christians, including Socrates and Heraclitus.

The main problem with Justin's theology is that he did not seem to know the biblical story. Anyone who is familiar with the story knows

that the pagan accusation was true on both counts. In the first place, true Christians are totally committed to the Kingdom of God as demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. To give one's ultimate allegiance to God in Jesus Christ is to place oneself in opposition to all forces and structures in society that contradict the Reign of God. That is why the first Christians, armed with the Holy Spirit, threatened to turn the world upside-down.

In the second place, according to the biblical story, Christianity is not a philosophical system which can be analyzed by some intellectual process. Rather, Christianity is the gospel, the good news of what God has done, is doing, and will continue to do in Jesus Christ. And the only way to understand the mystery of God's incarnation in the man from Nazareth is to let the Holy Spirit teach you. To depend upon the Holy Spirit is to understand that God himself must take the initiative by disclosing himself to us through his activity in our midst. That is why, according to the story, "the gospel is foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews" (I Cor. 1:23).

It was not so much that the Church Fathers ignored the biblical story, rather they misinterpreted or distorted it because a new and different orientation ordered their lives. They were trying to communicate a Hebraic-oriented faith to a Greek-oriented society. Later, when they allowed the Greek orientation to completely replace the Hebraic one (as with the Neoplatonic theology of Origen), Christianity became the kind of religion in which a person's highest aspiration was to be lifted above sense experience into immediate union with God. In such an ineffable experience individuality fades away, and the self, like a drop of water in a great ocean, is absorbed into the Divine. But, according to the biblical story, God is not some entity aloof from the human scene of travail and oppression. He takes part in human affairs to work out his purpose, making himself known by his mighty acts, which are historical events. This is the very heart of the biblical story.

Eventually the Church became so much a part of the world that Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire — when its Emperor Constantine embraced the Christian faith. He was responsible for calling the first ecumenical council at Nicea in 325. His major concern, however, was the unity of the Roman Empire. The Council itself, having forgotten the story and being guided by the principles of Greek philosophy, was concerned with the *ousia* (substance) of Jesus. They argued for days over the question of whether Jesus was *homoousios* (same substance, same essence) as God or *homooiousios* (like substance, like essence).

This concern to build Christian theology upon the foundation of Greek philosophy continued after the patristic period through the Middle Ages, from the Neoplatonic philosophy of Augustine to the Aristotelian theology of St. Thomas Aquinas. Even the Protestant Reformation with its emphasis on the return to the Bible could not recover the story. When

the Reformers read the Bible, they read it in light of one or the other aspects of the tradition of the Church. This tradition had been so tainted by Greek philosophy that any interpretation of the Bible in that light produced a distorted view of the story. Thus, the reformer Martin Luther was able to identify with the oppressors in society on the basis of his reading of the Bible and to speak of the state as a servant of God while the oppressed were being tortured by the state.

Therefore it is not surprising that the "white" westernized theology of today cannot cut through the Greek-oriented tradition and use the biblical story as the foundation for speech about God. Indeed, the appearance of Black Theology on the American scene is due largely to the failure of "white" theology to deal effectively with the story of God's revelation as expressed in the Exodus-event of the Old Testament and the Christ-event of the New Testament.

Black Theology is a very young discipline. Joseph R. Washington analyzed "black religion" in the publication of his book under that title in 1964.<sup>2</sup> By 1969 the phrase "Black Theology" was used to express many of the same concerns. Although most black scholars in religion contend that the *meaning* of Black Theology has theological roots stretching back to the pre-Civil War black religious tradition, the phrase itself is an event of the late 1960s.

The appearance of contemporary Black Theology is closely related to the open affirmation of blackness during the late 1960s. In the summer of 1966, Stokely Carmichael, then Chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, defined this open acceptance of blackness with the term "Black Power," declaring that black self-determination by any means necessary is the only appropriate reaction to white racism. In response to the new mood created by Black Power, a group of black churchmen made a theological statement in July, 1966, relating black religion to Black Power and including the following:

As black men who were long ago forced out of the white church to create and to wield "black power," we fail to understand the emotional quality of the outcry of some clergy against the use of the term today. It is not enough to answer that "integration" is the solution. For it is precisely the nature of the operation of power under some forms of integration which is being challenged. . . . Without . . . capacity to participate with power — i.e., to have some organized political and economic strength to really influence people with whom one interacts — integration is not meaningful . . . . We regard as sheer hypocrisy or as a blind and dangerous illusion the view that opposes love to power, but what love opposes is precisely the misuse and abuse of power, not power itself. So long as white churchmen continue to moralize and misinterpret Christian love, so long will justice continue to be subverted in this land.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Washington, *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press).

<sup>3</sup> *New York Times*, 31 July 1966, p. 35.

They not only affirmed Black Power and thus connected themselves with the tradition of Nat Turner, Henry Garnet, and Henry Turner; they also exposed the hypocrisy of white Christianity.

The black churchmen's statement on Black Power created the material and spiritual foundation for the later use of the term "Black Theology" in the first published book on the subject by James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969). Although Albert Cleage had published his *Black Messiah*<sup>4</sup> a few months earlier, Cone's book marked the beginning of the wide use of the term "Black Theology." A year following Cone's book, the editors of *Theological Education* published a supplement to the spring issue on "The Black Religious Experience and Theological Education." This issue consisted of the report from the special committee appointed by the American Association of Theological Schools for the purpose of offering some suggestions on the inclusion of the black religious experience "in the study, reflections and activities of the theological enterprise." The chairman, Charles Shelby Rooks, said:

Within the past three years, theological seminaries have come to a new awareness of a serious omission in their life and program: the religious experience of Black Americans. A good many conferences and conversations have developed in an effort to articulate the inclusion of their experience in the study, reflections, and activities of the theological enterprise. It was the welter of competing ideas and proposals that led the American Association of Theological Schools to form a committee to discuss the possibilities and to offer some suggestions about what has come to be known as "Black Studies." This is the focus of this report.<sup>5</sup>

By the fall of 1970, Black Theology was accepted by most seminaries as a legitimate theological discipline, and courses were offered covering some phase of the black religious experience. In the meanwhile, black theologians across the country were busy trying to analyze black religion in the light of the Old and New Testaments.

Black Theology is a return to the foundation. It uses the Old and New Testaments in its theological analysis. That is, Black Theology takes seriously the importance of the biblical story in theological discourse. Black Theology's use of the Bible as its theological base is a natural outgrowth from the religion which gave birth to it. The biblical story has always played a most significant role in black religion. Since Black Theology is the natural progeny of black religion,<sup>6</sup> an analysis of that religion will show the place of the biblical story in Black Theology.

<sup>4</sup>James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969); Albert Cleage, *Black Messiah* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968).

<sup>5</sup>Charles Shelby Rooks, ed., Report of the Special AATS Committee, "The Black Religious Experience and Theological Education of the Seventies," *Theological Education* 6, supplement (Spring 1970), p. S-3.

<sup>6</sup>See the development of this thesis and a discussion of how certain black theologians have failed to make black religion, and God, their point of departure in my recent study *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology* (Nashville: AMEC Publishing House, 1975).



Black religion has roots stretching back into the African tradition where story telling was a way of life. Born as it was in the midst of the American system of slavery, black religion was created out of an encounter of African tradition with Christianity in that peculiar setting. While it is true that Christianity was introduced to the slave by his white master, what was introduced to him was devoid of the story, because it is impossible to really *know* the story and presume to possess another as private property. So-called white "Christian" masters were busy quoting passages from the Bible such as "slaves obey your masters"; slaves were busy meeting in secret, learning about the story.

It was very important for the slaves to know the story because his very survival depended on it. Blacks were captured in Africa, placed aboard a stinking ship and sailed to the "land of the free and home of the brave." They were placed on the auction block and sold like cattle with no regard for family ties — wives were separated from husbands and children from parents. Whenever the master deemed it necessary the slave was "made to wear around his neck iron collars armed with prongs and forced to drag heavy chains and weights at his feet while working in the field. Sometimes he was flogged with terrible severity and had red pepper rubbed into his lacerated flesh so as to remind him of the extent and authority of his master. If he did not respond favorably to this treatment, some masters went as far as cutting off the slave's ears, knocking out his eyes, and burning him to death over slow fires."<sup>7</sup> In such a predicament, there is no comfort in philosophical speculation about the essence of divine nature. But, there is a hope that defies the logic of history in the story about the God who makes highways through Red Seas, locks lions' jaws, and cools fiery furnaces; who causes the blind to see, the lame to walk, the deaf to hear, and the dead to rise. It was this story that gave rise to such spirituals as:

Oh, Mary, don't you weep, don't you moan,  
 Oh, Mary, don't you weep, don't you moan,  
 Pharoah's army got drowned,  
 Oh Mary, don't you weep.

The reason the slave could sing and tell the story about the God who is involved in human history is because he had personally met this God. When he met the Divine, he was converted — transformed into a new creature, a free person, "fearing no man," because God had placed around him "a strong arm of protection." As a result of this personal encounter with the living God, black people in slavery and oppression caught a gleam of insight into the divine purpose for humankind which

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<sup>7</sup>Paraphrased from Theodore Weld, "Introduction to American Anti-Slavery Society." *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*, ed. Theodore Weld (New York: Arno Press, 1969), originally published 1839), pp. 9-10. Weld was one of the founders of the American Anti-Slavery Society and as one of its agents traveled throughout the country speaking against slavery and gaining converts to abolitionism. The rest of this book was a compilation of the testimony of 1,000 witnesses culled from 20,000 newspapers.

their oppressors could never know. This insight was further informed by scripture, so much so that the Bible soon became the very foundation of black religion. Through the study of its contents, black people interpreted and understood the biblical story to be relevant to the black condition in this country. Because of this divine revelation to the slave, black religion became the *only* mode of expression in America which was consistent with the revelation of God as expressed in the Exodus-event of the Old Testament and the Christ-event of the New Testament.

Thus, black people survived 244 years of slavery and over another hundred years of racism and oppression not only because we know the story, but also because we have our own story to tell. We can tell the story about how God brought Moses and the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt; we can tell the story of Joshua at the Battle of Jericho; we can tell the story of Daniel in the lions' den and the three Hebrews in the fiery furnace; but above all else, we can tell the story about how *we* got over.

Black religion, then, is the story about God's activities among black people, helping them to get over. This story has been preserved in the black church and can be heard where two or three are gathered in the name of God for prayer, testimony, song, or sermon.

It remains the task of the black theologian to organize these black expressions into a systematic, coherent theology, consistent with the biblical story. To do this, the black theologian himself must know and experience the black story. In this way he will be able to understand that meaning within black expressions which transcends the language in which they are articulated. Also, he will be acutely aware of the biblical foundation of the black religious tradition. He has merely to call the black church and black people back to their roots, the place where the story of God's revelation in the Exodus and in Jesus Christ was the cutting edge for the black story. This process of analysis not only makes Black Theology Christian, but the *only* theology in the history of Christianity that is.

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