

Black Christian Theology: A Challenge To The Black Clergy**

A relatively recent development in the field of Christian theology has been the emergence of black Christian theology.*** The major themes of black theology first appeared in the early 1960s in the writings of Joseph Washington and James Cone. These themes reflected a classical interpretation of the Christian faith; yet at the same time, the writings of Washington and Cone served as an impetus for the formulation of theological concepts emphasizing both the uniqueness of the black experience of oppression and the necessity of an interpretation of this experience in light of the gospel theme of liberation. In rejecting the imposition of white theology on black experience, experience becomes a dominant consideration in Christian interpretation. Black theologians insist on a reinterpretation of the sources of the Christian faith as they relate to all historical manifestations of black experience—from the African religious tradition and perspective, to the slave experience, to the black power movement. As a result, the emphasis of black theology differs from the logical, abstract creedal systems typical of white theological tradition in that black theology reinterprets traditional beliefs primarily in political and social terms. Thus, black theology is a theology of revolution. Its goal is to challenge black people to participate with God in the struggle to liberate all people from political and social oppression. As a suffering people, blacks are chosen to witness to liberation and to challenge injustice.

Black scholars have rearticulated traditional Christian theological concepts with varying degrees of secular and political emphasis. Consequently, a variety of theological postures have appeared. Washington, Major Jones, and J. Deotis Roberts, while broadly reflecting the major themes of contemporary black theology, tend to be conservative to mod-

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** An Evaluation Concerning the Acceptance of Black Christian Theology by the Clergy in Grand Rapids, Michigan

*** Future references to theology imply "Christian" theology

erate regarding both traditional Christian beliefs and their belief that liberation can be achieved through political change. Cone and Albert Cleage, however, are more liberal in their Biblical interpretations and propose more radical solutions to racial oppression.

All of these scholars reject a theological interpretation which attempts only to answer the question of what the Christian Gospel has to say to the white man in his daily experience. They deny a theology which does not challenge the reality of a dual standard of power for whites and submissiveness for blacks. They reject a theology of resignation which places all hope in individual salvation and in an after life. All propose a theology of protest which affirms pride in blackness and in the black struggle for liberation. Jesus, in His political role as a leader against an exploitative Roman government and in His victory over injustice is the model for this struggle.

It is unclear whether this emerging theology with variations from conservative to liberal is merely a theology articulated by black intellectuals or whether it is penetrating the thought and changing the perceptions held by the larger black community. Patterns of development and expansion of philosophical systems often follow a two-step communication process in which the opinions of the elite are gradually adopted by an intermediary group, in this case the black clergy, and are then presented to and adopted by the masses, the black religious community. This study proposes to determine whether contemporary black theology has modified traditional evangelical views among the black clergy and if so, in what manner.

It must be recognized that the themes articulated by the black clergy have always reflected a liberation message in response to slavery and to implicit and explicit racism. However, that liberation theme has been subordinated to traditional religious views and to political reality. It was not until the early 1960s - when there was also an increasing emphasis on ethnic identification and on political freedom for blacks - that liberation became a powerfully expressed and formalized theological position among scholars with the specific intent of openly confronting white oppression.

In order to analyze whether the contemporary black theologian is influencing the clergy to adopt a more active, theologically formulated political stance, a survey was designed to identify the views of the clergy. This survey was distributed to black clergymen in Grand Rapids, Michigan through the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance. The intention of the survey was:

- 1) to assess whether the black clergy in Grand Rapids is primarily evangelical or if its orientation is moderate or liberal as defined by the position of the contemporary black theologian,

- 2) to determine the major source for the beliefs of each clergyman,
- 3) to determine their familiarity with the position of the scholars whose ideas are most representative of contemporary black theology,
- 4) to determine if the clergy is strongly appropriating the liberation message of black theology,
- 5) if so, to determine if the concepts of black theology are reflected within the church a) as a message to the congregation, b) through the promotion of the church as an arena for politically confronting oppression, and c) through the political activism of the minister,
- 6) and if so, to determine whether the clergy specifically endorse violent or nonviolent means in seeking liberation,
- 7) to identify the clergy's position on integration in the church,
- 8) to identify their expectations of both the white and the black church about the responsibility for overcoming oppression, and
- 9) to assess their conclusions about the possibilities for racial reconciliation.

Several black scholars gave fair warning as to the handicaps under which an outsider works in a community which is generally impatient with studies and surveys to satisfy white curiosity. Before approaching the Alliance directly, the assistance of several key people was enlisted in order to minimize the difficulty of being both white and female.¹

The president of the Alliance, while very supportive, indicated that response would be limited in a community where basic needs are not being met because multiple demands are already being made on ministers. The virtual impossibility of contacting many members of the Alliance confirmed this problem. In addition, few had secretaries; some had no telephones. One member of the Alliance further stated that educational limitations of those surveyed would hinder this project. Also, several of the most influential and politically oriented members of the black clergy who could have assisted in overcoming some of the above difficulties had for various reasons terminated their membership in the Alliance.

The result was that the survey was too low (5 out of a total distribution of 70) to allow for statistical analysis and subsequent evaluation. Although the course of this study was revised, conversations with a variety of individuals spanning many levels of the community led to some observations, assumptions, and suggestions. The result is a subjective attempt to answer the questions which initiated this study. While this attempt is not comprehensive or definitive, it is hoped that it will be suggestive of the complex and diverse factors which influence theological

¹ Several very negative responses to the survey were definitely based on antagonism toward whites. This may have affected not only the percentage of respondents but also the answers of those who did respond.

and institutional direction and that it will indicate the necessity for confronting the rationalizations and misinterpretations of theology which inhibit racial unity. Also it is hoped that further consideration will be given to the value of a historical-contextual-existential approach to theological formulation, an approach which refuses to subordinate the concrete needs of man in his daily situation to abstractions.

*The Orientation of the Black Clergy
Regarding Political Activism*

In analyzing the content and the agenda of black theology, it becomes apparent that concrete political and social change are major objectives. This is dependent on the conclusion that the social order and religion are interconnected, that, in fact, there is no distinction between religion and politics. Political means are essential to attaining religious ends - specifically liberation for all men as the intention of God for His creation. However, this position represents only one of several dominant philosophical views among theologians and clergymen about the relationship between religion and politics. The first view opposes Christian political involvement on the premise that culture is not redeemable. The second view promotes participation in culture in the belief that God reveals Himself in all aspects of life and that good triumphs. The third view sees the imperfection of a culture which is the gift of God, but the non-corrupt realm of grace is placed hierarchically above the imperfection of culture. Christians belong to both orders and have obligations to both. However, political action cannot redeem a fallen world. The fourth sees the possibility that a fallen culture and social order can be transformed and redeemed which implies ethical responsibility for the state of the world.² While the fourth position is the foundation of contemporary black theology, it does not appear to be the dominant position of the black clergy in Grand Rapids. Rather than being concerned with the transformation of society, many expressed a fervent hope for the resolution of human evil in heaven as a variation of positions one or three above. The function of the church was considered that of providing a refuge from evil, oppression, and white domination.

Several ministers emphatically stated that political involvement is not the responsibility of the church. Individual salvation from sin is. Several others also specifically pointed out that denominational policy restricted or prohibited political participation. Theology appeared to be a stimulus for political activism only among a very limited group who perceive theology as a valid challenge to the existing social order. These ministers

² For a more detailed statement of these views of culture see H. Richard Niebuhr (1951). Christ and Culture.

are less concerned with a creedal theology and with statements of faith than are most black clergymen. They interpret theology as a way of viewing God and the world. The foundations for their theology are not narrowly doctrinal but are based more significantly on man's experience and his present situation.

These ministers also recognize that there is greater opportunity now than at any time in the past in the black community for obtaining power and overcoming injustice. Black theology can serve as a rationale for confrontation on the one hand, but on the other, its perspective is shaped in part by the increasing availability of power. These people recognize that the struggle for power in a Christian nation governed by a creed which proposes equality and brotherhood is most acceptable if it is expressed within a religious framework. Evil and prejudice are thus answerable to God. The appeal for equality is an appeal to conscience and to ultimate judgment. This legitimates the struggle for power and places limits as well on the means for attaining it.

The element of the Grand Rapids clergy which expressed this position generally feels that political activism requires a theological basis. Thus, it was suggested that the most radical black scholars would be forced to moderate their views. Blacks may be impatient for social change, but they do not generally endorse radical attempts to bring about such change. Radical scholars must understand the necessity of an ethical approach to power to avoid the evil which they are attempting to overcome.

The formation of the Alliance itself indicates that the black clergy has begun to participate in the political sphere. The message, however, which is presented to the church, while reflecting a liberation theme, is largely non-political, primarily because liberation is interpreted in religious terms and not in the highly secularized political form of black scholars.³ The church's message to the powerless seems to be one of emotional and spiritual solace through Christ. The source of this message is traditional Christianity modified by the needs of blacks who are victims of discrimination.

It does not appear that the black preachers with the power to effect change have considered the potential of the one institution in the black community which possesses the structure and the organization to do so. The general insistence on separation of religion and politics has obscured

³ In only one of the black churches attended could it be said that the content of the sermon was political. In fact, by contrast, it was emphatically political with an assessment of the Reagan administration and the welfare system, an appeal to participate in upcoming local elections, and an offer of information concerning various forms of locally available public aid. The final appeal was to Jesus and not to the government for the solution to human problems. (Sermon, March 20, 1983, by Rev. W. L. Patterson of True Light Baptist Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan.)

this consideration. The present clergy in Grand Rapids seem unaware of the relationship between black power and Christianity and are generally leaving political activism to secular organizations. The voices and writings of black scholars are a reminder that movements for social change always begin with a minority which separates from established positions. Most people have little habitual concern for active social change so long as their daily living patterns are not unduly threatened. The resulting questions are these: Is the black clergy contented with the dominant spiritual role of the church? Is it convinced that secular institutions are effectively creating possibilities for liberation without the need for direction from the church? How can the message of black theology serve to activate the black clergy to broaden the role of the church?

J. Deotis Roberts (1974: 192) describes Sherwood Eddy's concepts of the three dominant philosophies and motivations in American history:

- 1) To build a new world promoting the spiritual ideal of a Kingdom of God.
- 2) To achieve the secular American Dream of liberty and justice for all as proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence
- 3) To pursue mass materialism and appeal to selfish individuals which destroys the ideals of the first two philosophies.

Peter Berger (1979, 1961) in his writings describes the merger of these three goals and the perversion of the first two goals in the process. Theoretically, theologians are concerned with the first, but in practice, theology and the church reflect American society in their endorsement and legitimation of materialism. Black people have never fully participated in the American Dream. The choice, on the one hand, of incorporating that economic dream into black theology or, on the other hand of thinking of the possibility of a completely new society on earth is a question that the black theologian and church need to consider more intensely. It is a question which they must confront themselves and which they must also issue to the white church.

Educational Factors

Aside from theological and philosophical objections to political involvement, several other factors emerged which were essential in understanding this apparent reaction against or indifference to activism. Because of educational limitations among a clergy which often requires only a perceived call of God to the ministry and training by a local preacher without formal theological education, the clergy is unfamiliar with social and political philosophies and with argumentation concerning the role of theology. The minister often views the Bible as a story which emphasizes salvation and a personal God, not as a stimulus for ethical formulation, political debates, and concrete activism to liberate from op-

pression. In reaction to the survey, several ministers stated that they did not understand some of the questions. They were not receptive to arranging an appointment to review the questionnaire personally. Two clergymen confirmed that this probably indicated that there were others who reacted similarly and would therefore totally ignore the survey.

This educational limitation also indicates that the Grand Rapids clergy lacks exposure to the major concepts of contemporary black theology although as members of an oppressed race with a tradition of seeking liberation they may reflect some of its beliefs. Several very articulate clergymen expressed unfamiliarity with the names and writings of the more moderate and liberal scholars. Some informed the Alliance president that because they were unfamiliar with the major scholars mentioned or since they disagreed with their views generally, they would not answer the questionnaire. The scholars, in contrast, appear to represent a philosophical and intellectual elite with a limited audience and limited appeal within a conservative community separated from an academic community.

Economic Factors

Many of the clergy in Grand Rapids serve very small congregations. Their churches are barely surviving financially. The president of the Alliance stated that he and all other staff members in his church are unsalaried volunteers. The church survives in an economic setting which has forced the closing of some churches which are unable to finance basic building maintenance in spite of voluntary staffing. He stated he held a second shift factory job. He noted that attendance at Alliance meetings was variable, depending on shift and overtime schedules. This suggested that some of the other ministers also supported themselves through factory labor. Economic necessity and lack of vocational training thus directly limited the possibility of the full commitment of many talented men to the ministry. The first obligation to the congregation is to meet spiritual needs. Little time is available for motivating, educating, and organizing the community to achieve other goals.

In some cases, the economic needs of individual church members were so great that they took precedence over spiritual needs. The minister was often required to assist in emergencies - obtaining food provisions and arranging for utility bill payments.⁴ Some ministers said they were, therefore, too busy to reflect on the inter-relationship of theology and

⁴ It is interesting to note that the inter-city church of the only white member of the Alliance has organized a unique food distribution program which serves both needy black and white people. This model program demonstrates that the white church can become sensitized to injustice and react in a concrete manner. In this case, an excellent example of white-black cooperation illustrates theology in action.

politics. They act as required by circumstance or crisis, doing what they can to serve God and the community and to meet spiritual, psychological, and economic needs. In all, the total demands on the minister in the black community appear to be greater than on the minister in the white community.

Age and Health Factors

Age and health also limited the activism of a clergy which appeared to have few young members (under forty). In telephone follow-up, the number of respondents citing health problems and hospitalization seemed disproportionate numerically until one considers the age range.

Sociological Factors

In Johnstone's (Nelsen, 1971: 276-280) classification of black preachers, he notes that there are several identifiable characteristics of the militant clergyman in contrast to the moderate or traditionalist. A primary factor is age, with those under forty tending to be more militant. Other characteristics which correlate with militancy are 1) a high level of education, 2) higher comparative social status, 3) a liberal theological stance, 4) mainline denominational affiliation (in contrast to sects), 5) and a socio-political view of the ministry. Subjective and casual observations seemed to indicate that in Grand Rapids, none of these factors applies within the Alliance to a degree sufficient to create militance.⁵ While it is true that the general climate reinforcing ethnic pride and identity is impelling black leadership to the political forefront, it may be that the militancy and the assertion of black liberation and power of black theology may have to await another generation of black leadership.

The Nature of the Ministry in the Black Church

Both black clergymen and black leaders in secular positions noted that fragmentation and lack of unity seems to typify black church leadership. The explanation frequently proposed was that the church is the primary institution where the black with leadership qualities is recognized and is able to exercise power. Therefore power becomes competitive, creating either friction within a particular church or resulting in the formation of many small congregations, each led by an individual desiring power. It was even stated that the leadership of one individual can be so entrenched and so established that upon his resignation or death - since many retain their positions well beyond a normal retirement age - the

⁵ Johnstone (Nelsen, 1971: 282-283) also claims that the influence of militants is disproportionate to their numbers.

church may dissolve, each member then associating with another congregation with established leadership in preference to maintaining the existing institution. Although difficult to verify, the implication is that it is sometimes the man rather than the denomination or the community which is important. This implies that personal charisma and the desire for power, not theological principles, are a factor in the organization of the church. Black scholars (i.e. Washington and Cone) and black laymen, because of their awareness of these power factors, both expressed a lack of confidence in the clergy. It was suggested that the black clergy strongly resists anything which threatens this power since they have no other place to exercise it so readily.

Other factors were also noted by those interviewed pertaining to their lack of confidence in the clergy which perhaps lessens the effectiveness of the clergy. Some clergymen failed to provide a model of ethical behavior. Unenlightened, evangelistic preachers cannot relate the Bible to socio-political needs because they do not want to change the power image. The clergy was criticized for not envisioning a new society because it too often concentrates solely on alleviating pain and on assuring personal salvation. The clergy accept too readily only the role of priest because the prophet may represent a threat to the congregation which prefers not to seek liberation.⁶

It may also be that the clergy, to guard its own carefully sought and cultivated power, want to protect the church from white intrusion and domination. This reinforces the tendency of the black clergy to segregate itself from the mainstream where it would be exposed to both multi-racial leadership and to those very concepts of liberal theology and the social gospel which could increase its power base and provide a forum for confrontation and for a larger role in the total community.

The question which this raises is that of the goals of black clergymen. In protecting personal power, is the clergy failing to address the larger and the long-term needs of the congregation? Is the solely spiritual concept of the ministry legitimate? What can be done to raise the confidence of blacks in black leadership? Does white church leadership attempt to impose its standards, its views, and its organization on the black church? Is the desire for separatism, which inhibits reconciliation, legitimate? Why do many blacks abandon the church when they achieve sta-

⁶ The black community subordinates itself to the power of the preacher. However, in the larger community, many blacks accept white power figures more readily than black power figures when a choice is possible. This seems to indicate a general lack of confidence in black leadership. A black layman stated that during political elections endorsements are exceedingly rare from the pulpit, even in an era of emerging black political leadership. This derives not only from the viewpoint that the endorsement of a black candidate is simply too volatile an issue among a people who have accepted white leadership and who lack confidence in their race.

tus and education?⁷ What type of power is legitimate for the black clergy and church which is denied power in a white society?

The Evangelical Orientation of the Clergy

As previously noted, the major concern of the black clergy in Grand Rapids appeared to be the personal salvation of its members and the development of community support for the well-being of the members. This conclusion is based on specific statements indicating the need to draw sinners into the church, to redeem them from specific sins, and to convert them to Christ. All church services attended concluded with an altar call and a plea for commitment to Christ. All included an invitation for members in any kind of need to come forward for prayer or for consultation with a deacon or elder. In one church, the entire congregation was informed of specific problems, prayers were requested, and the person(s) involved was (were) openly and warmly assured of the support of the membership.⁸

Clergymen generally agree that this direct and immediate supportive function of the church supercedes political concerns. Beyond the primary goal of personal salvation as a preliminary to all other actions, the church exists to serve its members personally, to unite for individual and group self-esteem, for recognition of the black community, and for identity, not for confrontation. The community is to be protected, not exposed to pain and upheaval. The cost to the individual, either black or white, and to the group which actively confronts racism is often too great. Pain causes retreat. Therefore, most cannot adopt the stance of contemporary black theology which demands the courage to accept pain. The black scholar, however, believes that such pain is secondary to the greater suffering inflicted by discrimination. He claims that to ignore suffering is to perpetuate it.

Another predominant conclusion which emerges is, of course, that the black church is ironically caught between white creeds and its own

⁷ A black layman noted that the black middle class individual does not agitate for change once he has achieved certain economic goals. This raises questions as to whether oppression is only viewed in economic terms. Is the message of the church which preaches solace inapplicable to those who have achieved certain social and economic goals and an educational level which may exceed that of the clergy? This layman believes that the church's ministry is to the grassroots, those who are most likely to respond to a leadership which demands liberation.

⁸ The emotional support thus offered was overwhelming. (True Light Baptist Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan.) See Cheryl Gilkes (Fall, 1980) "The Black Church as a Therapeutic Community: Suggested Area for Research into the Black Religious Experience," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* for a further analysis of this function. The implications for the white church community warrant further investigation of this custom in the black church community.

unique psychological and philosophical needs as a racial minority. Because of the concentration on individual sin and salvation, the clergy in most cases has not yet analyzed the function of the church from any other perspective. It has not perceived the potential of black theology. It separates the sacred and the secular while insisting that, on the personal level, religion functions in all aspects of life. The shift to the political realm, however, has not been made. In this sense, theology serves the black church in Grand Rapids in a limited form. It is not viewed as a basis for action or for activism. It is rather viewed on a personal level as a basis for individual orientation to God. The orientation of the black church is insular regarding both the theological mainstream and contemporary black theologians.

*The Response of the Clergy to the White Community:
Integration and Reconciliation*

The black church is a shield against the white community. The individual reaction of several ministers to the survey was strong antagonism. Their statements conveyed resentment and mistrust at white interest in their church community and their theological stance. They stated that 1) black theology is the business of blacks, 2) whites would never fully accept black culture, 3) racial contact increases the potential for individual sin because each race approaches the other with false stereotypes.

Most ministers stated that basically whites and blacks are not different. However, they believe that social, cultural, and economic factors in this country prohibit integration and reconciliation. Their desire is not for interaction but for co-existence and non-interference. There were few, if any, white members in any of the congregations visited. Those observed appeared to participate actively as, for example, choir members and organists. Many ministers said they would welcome white members. They admitted, however, that they doubted whites would be comfortable in a black cultural setting. They were certain that their members would not venture into a white church,⁹ nor if they did would they accept the decorum of the white worship service. They would not want to give up active emotional and physical participation in worship.

The clergy agreed with the position of black theologians that the church must protect black self-esteem and identity. At this point, there is little desire for integration through the church because the black com-

⁹ One young black man stated that fear prevented him from entering a white church in spite of curiosity. He said the white church "smacked of the Ku Klux Klan." Several attempts by the writer to encourage white friends to attend black services were fruitless. In an insular, white community with virtually no interracial contact, there was real indifference to and ignorance of black culture.

munity needs an institution free of white intervention.¹⁰ Black people seeking economic, social, and political power no longer want to make concessions to any white power structure. They do not want to dilute the little power they have by including all oppressed peoples. They also recognize that black demands for equality and power threaten white power and generate counter-reaction and resistance. One minister said that he would take anything concrete from the white church—educational aid, funds—but he would not accept the attempt to dominate.

If racism is largely cultural and religious belief is highly contextual, then it appears that neither race is yet prepared for a contextual or cultural shift. Perhaps the church as an institution prevents the contact which challenges racism. If casual contact reinforces stereotypes, as Myrdal (1944) suggests, then the church is doing little, by choice or through indifference, to create an understanding of cultural differences. Is the interim cost at this point too great for institutional, cultural confrontation—for both black and white? Does the church, as Peter Berger implies, only reflect culture and not challenge it? Does generalized discrimination against blacks prohibit all whites from participating in the life of the black church community, or vice versa? To what extent does discrimination inhibit an affirmation of brotherhood among those who are above racism? Both black and white church communities must examine the basis for segregation in churches—specifically racism and counter-racism,—cultural misunderstanding, and the abuse of power. They must reflect on the potential of the church as an agent of reconciliation, a function which seems to be largely ignored.

The Black Clergy and the Black Theologian

In response to personally posed questions about the content of black theology, the Grand Rapids clergy indicated a strongly negative reactions to the more radical proposals of black theologians. They articulated criticisms which can perhaps legitimately be directed toward black theology. If the church has not accepted black theology, they felt that it is largely because theologians are too far removed from the church. Theologians have not effectively conveyed to the clergy the demand for a concrete response to oppression in terms that are easily understood and real-

¹⁰ It may be helpful to consider various theological responses to the question of segregation-integration in light of Peter Berger's statement (1969: 86-87) on the sociological functions of religion:

Religion functions in similar fashion, sociologically speaking, when it gives sacred sanction to the integrationist goal as when it identifies the segregationist status quo with the divine will. In both cases it is operating as social religion in the service of a particular group. It just happens that the interests of one group demands radical change while those of the other call for conservative defensiveness.

istic in view of the clergy's orientation and limitations.

Countering this criticism, Wilmore (Wilmore and Cone, 1979:246) states that the clergy does not understand that secular conflict and struggle can be sanctified, that ethnic experience authenticates God's revelation and gives meaning to blackness. However, this suggests that theologians must initiate dialogue and must be able to propose and justify a practical program for the church knowing that mutual dialogue will modify the stance of both the theologian and of the clergy toward a doctrinal consensus. The theologians' task is to articulate the theological and philosophical principles which the clergyman can implement and utilize to increase the effectiveness of the church in serving the needs of its people. The theologian cannot simply voice a philosophy which exceeds the understanding of the clergy and the potential of the church. Dialogue must be initiated in order to bridge the gap between the idealism of the scholar and the reality of the church.

The black theologian does not accept the conservatism of the black church. The black clergy in large part does not accept the radicalism of the black scholar. The scholar is impatient: the clergyman is subdued and tentative towards social and political change. Many clergymen are suspicious of the secular nature of black theology. There is confusion as to ultimate goals. Is the purpose of political activism to participate in capitalism rather than to defeat racism by spiritual change and renewal? Is black theology nothing more than liberal pragmatism set in the framework of white Christianity, a theology which equates God's purpose for man with the American dream? It is not always clear how oppression is defined or how the black community defines liberation. It is not clear what the black community expects when it demands full participation in society.

Black theology challenges bureaucratic, institutional churches which obscure the reality of life and suffering. The black church is subject to the universal failure to confront reality. Its tendency is to retreat from that which causes suffering, even while inflicting suffering. The message of black theology is that man must imperfectly seek redemption in the present, in the social, economic, and political structures of society. He must struggle for joy and brotherhood in the present which gives the promise of a future. Only as man struggles to fully realize redemption can he fully respond to life and to God.

Conclusion

In analyzing the criticisms of black theology, it must be recognized that a full range of theological positions has not yet been formulated by black theologians. Theological speculation has no end point. It is never conclusive or comprehensive. However, in contrast to traditional theol-

ogy, the expansion and systematic construction of black theology is in its initial phases. As it develops a wider range of expression, it will perhaps address the criticisms which have been directed to it and will incorporate revisions in light of further demands for reflection.¹¹

Some ministers and scholars emphatically state that contemporary black theology is only one expression of theology. (Washington, 1964; Roberts, 1971b; Harvey, 1981-1982; Holbrook in Bruce, 1978) It is too contextual, too particular. Thus it may serve as a basis for perpetuating racism and antagonism. These critics state that black theology is too radical regarding whites; it is too concerned with white sin and not concerned enough about black sin and the need for forgiveness. It overemphasizes black suffering, experience and injustice, and black freedom. It ignores joy and celebration. It unrealistically proposes the possibility of human perfectability. It is academic and elitist. It ignores the ultimate goal of brotherhood and ignores as well other human problems such as guilt and war.

The question is whether the black theologian is seeking liberation, and if so, for whom, or whether he is seeking revolution, and if so, by what means and for what end. There must be a theological truth which serves to place limits in the struggle for black liberation. The problem of oppression is a human not just a racial problem. Theology cannot be defined solely in terms of blackness, particularly when it opposes a theology which has been defined wholly in terms of whiteness. In spite of criticisms directed at black theology, it does address the question of racial unity, brotherhood, and injustice. It challenges the clergy to examine injustice and liberation as theological imperatives.

It must be concluded that the black clergy is presently not adopting the liberation message of black theology because of the evangelical orientation of the clergy, because of unfamiliarity with the concepts of black theology, and because of the failure of both clergyman and theologian to encourage dialogue. The lack of dialogue and the controversy between the black clergy and the black theologian is not hopeless. This controversy reflects the human inability to work to logical conclusions on divergent viewpoints. But the challenges and counter-challenges which clergy and scholar offer to each other indicate that there is hope because men continue to grapple with the human situation, to analyze it, and to propose ideals in the belief that the attempt to confront the real with the ideal will bring man a little closer to the kingdom of God. One must hope that both the black theologian and the black clergy will assume the

¹¹ See William Jones (May 3, 1972). "Toward an Interim Assessment of Black Theology," *The Christian Century* for an incisive discussion of the position that black theology is in an immature, developing phase but that its validity rests with its recognition that ethnic suffering must be assimilated into one's concept of God.

responsibility for better communication in a mutual attempt to make liberation a goal for all men.

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