

Pastoral Ministry in the Origin and Development of Black Theology

I.

W. E. B. DuBois made the famous statement that the problem of the 20th century is the color line.¹ What did he mean? He was making the point that race and color have ontological significance in the ethos and worldview of white Western societies. He was saying that the mystique of race and color, particularly of Blackness and Whiteness, would present an inescapable problem to our thinking, feeling, politics and economics, culture and religion, for at least a hundred years.

If the great man was right, and I believe he was, it makes no sense to talk about folklore, literature, art, science, philosophy, or even Christian theology as if they were somehow unaffected by the problem of race and ethnicity. That is the point with which we must begin this discussion. At least from the 15th century Christian theology has been tainted by racist thinking. Certainly the race problem has been ubiquitous and quintessential in the Western hemisphere. We breath it in the air. We take it in with our mother's milk.

Two weeks ago, at an international conference on negritude and Afro cultures in the Americas, I heard a Black Peruvian anthropologist, Dr. Victoria Santa Cruz, say that when she was a young girl, Black mothers told their children that there was a stream somewhere between heaven and earth that everyone had to cross over when they died. When Blacks who were going to heaven crossed that stream their ugly black color would disappear and they would all turn white. "Often as a young girl," she said, "I wanted to die so I could find that passage and become white."

Such a story does not shock me. When I was a young boy growing up

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¹ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1961), p. 23.

in the streets of North Philadelphia, there was a saying that circulated among us boys. It was a folk aphorism that evidently was being passed down from one generation of street urchins to another. It went like this:

Dark man born of a dark woman, sees dark days.
He rises up in the morning like a hopper-grass,
He is cut down in the evening like aspara-gras.

Where did it come from? That is one of the mysteries of folklore. But notice in this little maxim the faint allusion to Psalm 90:5-6.

. . . they are like grass which groweth up.
In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up;
In the evening it is cut down, and withereth.

It is a very Biblical saying and suggests how a folk theology is born among a common people steeped in the language of Scripture. But to find such bitter words related to skin color on the lips of young children also tells us something about the consciousness of color discrimination among Philadelphia youth, and how it helped to shape our self-identity in the ghetto of the City of Brotherly Love.

Of course, there were other more positive sayings and proverbs, "The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice." And, as Charles Buchanan Copher taught generations of I.T.C. students, for five hundred years the Black world celebrated the Blackness of Eben-melech who rescued Jeremiah from the pit; the Ethiopian eunuch who was baptized by Philip, the Evangelist; Simon of Cyrene who carried our Lord's cross behind him up the heights of Calvary; and other Biblical characters and texts that illustrate the fact that God did not despise his Black children, as some white Christians taught, but through suffering and struggle, prepared them for a great destiny. A study of the sermons of Black preachers in the 19th century will show that one of their favorite texts was Psalm 68:31—"Princes shall come forth from Egypt, and Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God." Such was the raw material of a Black theology in North America, the Caribbean and West Africa from the beginning of our second introduction to Christianity.

Two points are being made by these observations. First, that this way of doing theology is at least as old as the Atlantic slave trade, if not older. It did not begin during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Secondly, that African American ethnicity is inseparable from the doing of theology in Western societies. The God-talk that evolves from reflection on ethnicity in a culture that is as saturated with the consciousness of color and racial prejudice as this one, is not some *other* theology which stands over against a "genuine" Christian theology that is the property of the white Church, but *is* Christian theology, without qualification. Jesus Christ authenticates our will to be—to survive as a Black people in a racist-controlled environment. Jesus Christ must have some-

thing to do with our affirmation of Black being, our "power to be," or he was not involved in our creation, does not know who we are, and therefore, cannot be our Savior.

When young Black people accuse Christianity of being "a white man's religion," they are telling us, perhaps without knowing it, that they have not been taught what I am saying. They are expressing doubt and distress at the failure of the Black Church to portray Jesus Christ as a Black Messiah who not only has the power to satisfy their deepest yearning for self-affirmation, but who also takes upon himself their Blackness and triumphs over their encumbrances and adversities in a world dominated by white people.

Dr. King began to appreciate the agony of our young people toward the end of his life. Although he did not outwardly affirm Black theology, as such, one can see in his last sermons and writings a turn toward Black ethnicity as providential and Black people as destined for a special role in the economy of God. In his last book he spoke of African American people being called "to imbue our nation with the ideals of a higher and nobler order." Black theologians before him made that same messianic claim for the faith of their people. King was speaking out of a tradition that began here in the 18th century.

This is our challenge. If we will dare to meet it honestly, historians in future years will have to say there lived a great people—a black people—who bore their burdens of oppression in the heat of many days and who, through tenacity and creative commitment, injected a new meaning into the veins of American life.²

So Black theology is not some strange and illicit teaching that some Black thinkers get involved in as they try to make sense of the Christian faith. And Martin Luther King, Jr. did not repudiate the implications of Black theology. The longer he lived the more explicit he became about the depth of white racism in American culture and the more convinced that Black Christianity, at its best, represented a purer form of the faith for the vocation of redemptive suffering that, in the mystery of providence, somehow became the lot of an African people.

II

But the issue before us is not an apology for Black theology. Black theological reflection has been researched, explained, attacked and defended now for almost twenty-five years. It has stood the test of time and we need not constantly defend it, as if it will have no validity until white theologians give up their objections to it.

The question today is Black theology's relevance for the pastoral min-

² Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 134.

istry, its utility as a way of doing theology in the local congregation and the counseling room, its practicality for dealing with the normal, everyday needs of our people as we move among them as pastors and priests. It is my opinion that it is precisely in such settings during the civil rights movement that we became aware of the necessity of a contemporary Black theological perspective developed on the foundation of an earlier tradition. If Black theology today is failing to reach our pastors and congregations it may well be because it has ceased to harmonize the radical message of Black liberation with the more conservative message of healing and self-fulfillment through a saving faith in Jesus Christ. To be sure, that is more easily said than done, but the religious history of African-American people in this hemisphere proves that the capability of bringing about such a coherence between liberation and sanctification is the genius of the Black religious consciousness in North America.

It is my contention that our encounter as pastors with the militant young people of the 1960s helped to bring about this most recent burst of Black theological activity. One personal incident must suffice to illustrate my point about the origin of contemporary Black theology. On the night before James Forman was scheduled to present his Black Manifesto for reparations to the United Presbyterian General Assembly, meeting in San Antonio in May 1969, I found myself engaged in a heated discussion with a group of young urban guerrillas whom I had permitted to occupy my hotel suite. The discussion centered on the idea of the Black Manifesto, reparations and the Bible, the relevance of belief in Jesus Christ and the Church. At the climax of the argument, as proof that they were not just not talking revolution, but prepared to start one, one of the young people pulled out from under my bed two long wooden boxes tightly packed with automatic weapons and ammunition. I learned afterward that this ordnance had been shipped by Greyhound bus from Miami, although I cannot say that Jim Forman knew anything about their intention to intimidate the Assembly the next day when he was to present the demands of the Black Economic Development Conference for reparations from the United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.

To say that I was shocked by the discovery of those weapons in my room would be the understatement of my life. I had to assume that my young guests were dead serious. I tried to disguise the fact that I was on the verge of panic as we continued to discuss whether such a tactic as violent confrontation could be strategically or ethically justified. The image in my mind, as I argued, was the picture of a ludicrous stick-up on the stage of the San Antonio convention hall, with the consequence of a bloody skirmish with the police and the F.B.I. that would set our cause back a hundred years.

We talked all night. The discussion ranged over what it means to be Black and Christian. We ruminated about God's judgment in political

and cultural struggle. We dialogued about the failure of religion and what kind of theology would do justice to the legitimate grievances of young Black people and, at the same time, remain faithful to the demands of the gospel. We discussed the Black Muslims, holy war, and Jesus Christ as the liberator of the outcast and downtrodden.

When the sun finally came up over San Antonio I emerged from that smoke-polluted hotel suite, unshaven and bone-weary. I was not really sure what they would do that day, but I knew that I had been their pastor that night—perhaps the only pastor some of them had ever had. I knew that what was troubling their souls had an external source in our racist society. I knew that during that long night, I as pastor and they as my young, critical congregation had, in fact, been creating a Black theology of liberation together.

One of those young men was Irving Davis, of Teaneck, N.J. who died tragically on April 22, 1981. Before his death Irving became my good friend and something of a lay theologian. I wrote a eulogy for him that was published in *Presbyterian Outlook* which I entitled "A Prophet Without Portfolio." It read in part:

I will remember Irving Davis most for what he did for me and several other clergy who were drawn, sometimes kicking and screaming, into the magnetic field of his vision of what the churches should be about in Africa and the Caribbean. Some of us used to say that we evangelized this hard-nosed black revolutionary who came to throw a monkey wrench into the ecclesiastical machinery which he believed was grinding the faces of the oppressed and stayed to become a partner in mission and a brother. We now know that he evangelized us.³

The point of all this is not to glorify young Black revolutionaries I have known, or to present Black theology as a new situation ethics that justifies anything it wants to and calls it Christian, as long as it serves Black prerogatives. I simply want to make two points: first, that incidents such as this one in San Antonio were not isolated incidents. Many Black urban pastors were forced to face the problem of how to minister to disillusioned young people during the 1960s and '70s, and it was out of the struggle to find religious meaning in the cause of Black dignity and freedom that a contemporary Black theology came into existence. Secondly, and this is my main point: the new Black theology some of us were trying to develop was partly a *pastoral* theology. Rooted in the historic experience of the Black Church, it sought to bring the gospel to bear upon the most exasperating problems of marginated and cynical young people during one of the most difficult periods in American history.

³ *The Presbyterian Outlook*, May 25, 1981, p. 9.

III

In a new book entitled *Soul Theology: The Heart of American Black Culture*, by Henry H. Mitchell, a Black theologian, and Nicholas C. Lewter, a Black Baptist pastor and psychotherapist in private practice, the authors convincingly argue that authentic Black theology is embedded in the "life-giving affirmations of the Black oral tradition," and that it is primarily communicated in a pastoral or counseling context. By studying clinical cases in Lewter's psychological practice, Mitchell and Lewter uncover the core belief system of the Black Church with the purpose of reconstructing what they will call our "Soul theology." What they are able to demonstrate is the possibility of leading persons to greater emotional stability, physical well-being and spiritual wholeness by raising latent folk affirmations to consciousness and encouraging their clients to reappropriate the therapeutic power of Black belief. Accordingly, Mitchell and Lewter contend that Soul theology, "unlike the widespread classification of Black theology with the theologies of liberation," preserves the "nourishing spirituality" of the belief system of ordinary Black folk.⁴

This book contributes an important corrective to Black theological reflection that has sometimes over-emphasized rationalistic polemics and political activism. It rightly brings us back to the pastoral dimensions of theology which had been neglected during the movement days. But notwithstanding this virtue, the authors fail to make unambiguously clear that Black or Soul theology cannot be either-or, but must be *both-and*. It is precisely the pragmatic spirituality of Black faith that requires the pastoral emphasis of Black theology to include both the personal and the social aspects of our common experience. And because the personal and social realms are inseparable in real life, Black theology must refuse to make pastoral ministry a spiritual function that is separable from Christian political action.

My friendly, but most serious criticism of the Mitchell-Lewter interpretation of Black theology is that it does not take enough account of the way that personal ills, as C. Wright Mills was fond of saying, inescapably bisect social problems. That conjunction of the personal and social dimensions of life is simply taken for granted by mental health professionals who work in the Black community.

During the 1960s two Black psychiatrists, William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, published a study based on their clinical work with Black patients. They examined scores of cases of psychological suffering requir-

⁴ Henry H. Mitchell and Nicholas C. Lewter, *Soul Theology: The Heart of American Black Culture* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), p. 11, and see the statement on the dust jacket.

ing professional counseling among Black men, women and children. They found that in many instances mental illnesses were directly traceable to internalized frustration and rage induced by the effects of racism and oppression in the environment.

One of the problems in understanding the discontent of black people in America is highlighted in this material. The relationship between intrapsychic functioning and the larger social environment is exceedingly complex. Among other things, Negroes want to change inside but find it difficult to do so unless things outside are changed as well.⁵

Grier and Cobbs present an even more sobering discovery. It was their conclusion that the role of the Christian religion, when shaped by white norms and values, had more often served to depreciate and debase Black people than to make them more self-affirming and psychologically healthy.⁶ In other words, their data would seem to argue for the necessity of a Black Christian theology to counteract the negative, guilt-producing effects of the religion which was foisted upon Blacks during slavery and continues to regard Blackness as a symbol of that which is innately inferior and evil.

I think, however, that both Grier and Cobbs, and Mitchell and Lewter, have overstated their cases in opposite directions from one another. A more correct view is that authentic Black religion has refused to disengage the spiritual from the secular. The best of Black preaching down through the centuries has made it clear that piety and practical action go together. That neither personal counseling nor political activity is sufficient to ensure peace of mind and individual happiness. My childhood pastor, Dr. Arthur E. Rankin, always reminded us that, "You ought to pray about it, but soon you have to get off your knees and *do* something." It was a familiar saying among some Black preachers I have known that "If you don't do the devil, the devil will sure do you." These choice examples of folk wisdom tell us that active discipleship, continuous engagement in struggle, is one way of keeping the devil off balance, of defending oneself and one's congregation against the ever-present machinations of evil.

Black preachers have been convinced that only those who know the Lord and have been sanctified by the blood of Christ, are able to fight off the forces arrayed against them—both in the depths of the psyche and in the external world of tribulation and injustice. It is the power of the Holy Spirit in a situation of extreme adversity that refreshes the weary soldier of the cross and equips him or her to "stay in the field, children, ah, until the war is ended;" to fight with all your might both in the

⁵ William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, *Black Rage* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 196-197.

physical body and in the body politic.

I am saying that Mitchell and Lewter are to be commended for trying to make Black theology more of a pastoral theology. But becoming more pastoral should not divest it of its theory and praxis as a theology of liberation. Because it cannot speak of wholeness and healing without, at the same time, speaking of health delivery systems, government bureaucracies, social security, houses and jobs, Black theology refuses to offer the people a spiritual bromide. Instead, it seeks to motivate them to bring about the political changes that abolish misery and promote long-term health for millions of individuals. The emphasis on pastoral ministry is, therefore, a needed corrective, but it must delve more deeply into the historic Black response to our Lord's prophetic summons: "to set at liberty those who are oppressed."

IV

The celebrated historian, the late Sydney E. Ahlstrom, made a remark about Black religious history that might well be applied to the field of theology. Ahlstrom observed the desirability of a "thorough renovation" of American church history. He went on to suggest that the paradigm for such a renovation is the Black religious experience which has been excluded from all previous synoptic histories.⁷ With the same purpose of recovering marginal traditions that question the norms of the majority, it can be shown that Black theology provides a paradigm for the renovation of American systematic theology. Its particular contribution is the revalorization of African American spirituality and an emphasis upon the historic themes of Black religion in the United States: survival, elevation and liberation.⁸

Nothing is more obvious or more urgent than such a renovation in this period when the Jimmy Swaggarts, Jerry Falwells and Pat Robertsons are making successful inroads everyday into the white middle class with pious appeals for American intervention in Central America and the rejection of liberation theology. We dare not surrender the young, Black middle class constituency of our churches to this white theology. Here in Atlanta we learned recently that Bishop Earl Paulk, who is attracting an increasing number of Blacks, offers what he calls "kingdom theology." Paulk told an *Atlanta Constitution* reporter, "It is a whole new theology . . . What we're doing is setting up a network by which we can spread propaganda . . . We will accomplish enough [so] that the systems of the

⁷ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 12-13.

⁸ I cannot analyze these themes in this paper, but have dealt with them at length in other essays. I consider them the building blocks of Black religious thought in the 19th century.

world will collapse because of their inability to survive, and what will be left will be a system the church has built."⁹

The kingdom theology of conservative evangelicalism intends to institute a Christian politics, a Christian public education, a Christian economics, and a born-again Christian culture that "will take dominion over the world." It would snatch us all from the jaws of the secular humanists and a Godless communism. It need not be concerned with poverty and degradation because it teaches that the poor and oppressed are God-forsaken because of their sins. It has no use for the World Council or the National Council of Churches because both affirm contextual theologies and cultural pluralism, twin works of the devil.

It should come as no surprise that Black theologians belong to a group that has long experienced racism at the hands of religious people who characteristically make such claims. We suspect that the conservative evangelical revolution of today frequently masks white supremacy. Because the white Church has as much to fear from this right wing resurgence as we do, some of us have urged our white friends to discover Black theology. Black theology has to do with more than the Black Church because it contributes to the enlightenment of white Christians by unmasking the racism and cultural imperialism under the garments of this new evangelical phenomenon. In its best form, therefore, Black theology teaches a theological option for the poor and oppressed that can help all of us to discover a compassionate and holistic pastoral ministry which recognizes the essential coherence between genuine spirituality and liberal politics.

In a new book for which I had the privilege of writing the Foreword, the Dutch theologian Theo Witvliet discusses Black theology as representative of the underside of history where Christ is and where the Church must be.

The confrontation with black theology here represents an enormous positive challenge. Its polemic has a positive side, 'Polemic is love.' In its unmasking of the contradiction of Christianity there is a plea for conversion, *metanoia* for a radical transformation of perspective, which leads to the domain of the hidden history, the history which, judged by the usual church norms, belongs rather in the history of heresy. Black theology wants to argue from this specific history extending from the invisible church of the time of slavery [that in this history] there is a glimpse of liberation, of the great light that shines over those who live in a land of deep darkness (Isaiah 9:1, John 1:5).¹⁰

Although grossly misunderstood when he first made the statement, I believe that James H. Cone was on sound ground when he wrote in 1969

⁹ *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 3, 1987, Sec. A, p. 4.

¹⁰ Theo Witvliet, *The Way of the Black Messiah: The Hermeneutical Challenge of Black Theology as a Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987), p. 88.

that white Christians have to become Black. "To be black," he wrote, "means that your heart, your soul, your mind, and your body are where the dispossessed are."¹¹ Some whites are incensed that anyone would dare suggest that they had to become Black in order to be born again. But Cone was saying that insofar as Blackness in the color symbolism of all Western art stands for the "despised and rejected of men," God is Black, Jesus is the Black Messiah, and it is impossible to be reconciled to the least of Christ's brothers and sisters without taking upon oneself the reproach of Blackness, i.e., identification with the oppressed and participation in their struggle for liberation.

V

When one combines the emphasis of Witvliet and Cone with the emphasis of Mitchell and Lewter, a view of Black theology as pastoral emerges with a quite specific meaning. Black theology becomes pastoral theology not merely because it "deals with those consequences [of God's self disclosure in history] as they pertain to the roles, tasks, duties, and work of the pastor" (Thomas C. Oden's definition of pastoral theology¹²), but because it also draws from traditional, culture, and experience that theoretical knowledge and praxis of social change that enables the pastor to unite sanctification and liberation. It helps him or her to see the connection between the health-giving experience of counseling and spiritual exercises, on one hand, and the *shalom-making* experience of action in the world, on the other.

Black theology, as a pastoral theology,¹³ seeks to read the signs of the times to discover what God is doing with individuals trapped in the misery of personal sins, and communities trapped in worldly structures that oppose ethnic self-determination and encourage cultural suicide. Black theologians seek to engender in the church, through worship, preaching, teaching and exemplary action in the world, a pragmatic spirituality which takes hold of broken lives and leads people intelligently and hopefully into a healing conflict with every false power and illegitimate authority over their lives.

Although James Cone does not define what he does explicitly as a pastoral theology, he has consistently recognized the coherence between spirituality in the sanctuary and the struggle in the streets. For Cone,

¹¹ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), p. 151.

¹² Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), p. x.

¹³ I first heard Rev. Raul Suarez, president of the Cuban Ecumenical Council, challenge Black theology to "become a pastoral theology" in Havana in 1986. Suarez is one of the leading Cuban theologians of liberation and teaches at the seminary in Mantanzas.

any study of the history of our pilgrimage from slavery will confirm the inseparability of sanctification and liberation. Thus, he stresses the necessary role that worship, preaching and pastoral leadership have played, not only in nurturing the souls of Black folk, but in shaping their churches as agents of liberation in the world.

The contradiction between the experience of sanctification and human slavery has always been a dominant theme in black religion. It is found not only in the rise of independent black churches but also in our songs, stories, and sermons. When the meaning of sanctification is formed in the social context of an oppressed community in struggle for liberation, it is difficult to separate the experience of holiness from the spiritual empowerment to change the existing societal arrangements. If "I'm a chile of God wid soul set free" because "Christ hab brought my liberty," then I will find it impossible to tolerate slavery and oppression.¹⁴

To the extent that Black preachers are seriously calling for a Black theology that is more relevant to what they do in the counseling room, the church school and the sanctuary, they must appropriate the whole of Black religion and not just a part of it. They need to be constantly reminded that the "old time religion" among our people had a powerful, though sometimes covert, social action and cultural renewal component that was utilized by our predecessors in lyceums, literary societies, benevolent clubs and abolitionist groups within the congregations, and active involvement in Reconstruction politics and Pan-Africanism in the wider community.

All of these activities were evidence of being "saved" and members of a saving community. It was this life and work of the churches that contributed inestimably to the psychological health and stamina of Black Christians. The point needs to be made over and over again, in the face of many temptations of educated young Black people today to retreat into anti-intellectualism, privatism and other-worldliness, that for our ancestors true spirituality was considered neither unreflective nor devoid of political relevance. Being born again, sanctified and rendering prayer and praise of God in daily life was a prerequisite to the exercise of cultural and political responsibility.

Whether or not our Black churches will be able to build for the future upon this rich inheritance depends upon its current leadership. The relatively newer denominations, like the Church of God in Christ, or increasingly popular forms of Christianity among Blacks—such as Black Roman Catholicism, must assume a larger responsibility alongside the older denominations, for shaping the message of the faith to meet the continuing needs of Black people for personal sanctification and survival, social and cultural elevation, and political and economic liberation. At the

¹⁴ James H. Cone, *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Co., 1986), pp. 31-32.

same time, some of us from the older denominations need to be more sensitive to the present deficiencies of Black theology, including its excessive activism and its debilitating sexism which ignores or subordinates the contribution of Black women.

If Black theologians will recognize that radical opposition to all forms of social injustice is a legitimate, but not the exclusive concern of theological reflection, they will give greater assistance to local congregations in the development of the educational and pastoral dimensions of ministry. As I look at what is going on at this seminary and a few others where Black men and women are preparing for ministry, I am hopeful about the utilization of Black theology in our churches. God is not through with Black people. We may yet witness an unprecedented revival of Christian faith among Africans of the Diaspora in all parts of the world. Such a revival cannot help but have an invigorating influence upon the whole ecumenical movement.