

Black Theology and Black Power

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Dear friends of the "Saturday Seminar":

For six Saturday mornings we have been discussing together the question how we may bring the gospel of the sovereign grace of God in Christ to lost men today. We started our discussion with an analysis of Paul's address to the men of Athens.

Paul was interested in two things. In the first place he wanted to make clear to the Greeks that they should repent from being creature worshippers and should become creator worshippers. To be a creature worshipper spells death, death for this life and death hereafter. The judgment day is coming.

The situation was far worse than any of their great Greek philosophers had ever thought of it as being. Men are not innocently seeking for truth. By means of their systems of philosophy they are actually holding under, repressing, the truth in unrighteousness. They are honest enough on the surface but deep down in their hearts they hate God. And still deeper down in their heart they know that they hate God. "Knowing God," says Paul, "they did not hold him in remembrance."

But if things are much worse than the Greeks thought they were, things are also much better than such men as Plato and Aristotle thought they were. The Son of God, Jesus Christ, through whom the world was made and through whom the world is brought toward its final goal, has come to save his people from their sin. He bore the wrath of God for them on the cross. He was forsaken of God for them. And then he arose from the dead for their justification. They may now claim the righteousness of Christ as their own. They need now fear no man. They have died with Christ from their sin and they have with Christ risen to eternal life.

It was thus that Paul made plain to the men of Athens that the gospel of salvation involves an outlook on human life and history which is the opposite at every point of the philosophy that was held by the Greeks. And the philosophy held by the Greeks was, at bottom, the same as that held by all mankind. All mankind was represented in Adam and all man sinned against God in Adam at the beginning of history. All men are fallen away from God. They are apostate.

They are rebels against the law of God's love. Paul wants those who with him have believed the gospel to tell all men everywhere that they are dead in trespasses and sins. They hate God. They cannot receive the gospel by virtue of their own intellectual insight or by virtue of their own will. They must be born again. They need not only new light but they also need new power of sight.

In the second place Paul wants the Greeks to understand that though they need to be born again and that though the new birth they need must be given them by the Holy Spirit of God, they are held responsible for their sin against God. Moreover, as knowing God they know that their own wisdom has been made foolishness with God.

Paul did not work out these matters in his brief address to the Greeks. But they knew well enough that their effort at trying to find meaning in life had failed. These efforts had failed by their own standard.

The Greeks had set out boldly saying that they would accept nothing to be true unless they could understand it exhaustively. Parmenides expressed this idea by saying that only that can exist which man can, without contradiction, say must exist. Socrates said that he wanted to know what the nature of holiness is regardless what gods or men would say about it. Like all other men, Greeks assumed not only that they were independent of God but also that the whole world exists independently of God. In other words, they assumed that the world surrounding man existed by chance.

Take now these three points together: (a) the idea that man is not created, (b) that the facts of the world are not created and therefore not directed by the creator-God, and (c) that man must do what God alone can do, that is give his own original interpretation of himself in his relation to the world, and we understand why the Greeks would not accept Paul's gospel. Paul tells us that the creator-God has a plan for the whole course of history. All things in the world are related to one another in terms of that plan of God. But when man rejected God and his plan for him then he had virtually to take the place of God. He did not want God to tell him who he was and what the world was and what he was to do with it. He did not want God to tell him what is true or false, or what is right or wrong. And what was the result? The result was a colossal exhibition of folly. Man tried to understand all things in relation to one another and when he did try to do this he had to do it by referring all things to some unknown eternal principle of unity. And not knowing anything about this eternal unknowable principle of unity he worshipped without knowledge. He made an altar to the what on his own principle, was an unknowable sort of something. Fallen man made a god for

himself in order that this god might save him from his ignorance and from his vice but since by his own admission man could know nothing of this god, how could this god help him to learn anything about himself or about the world? Aristotle's "God" exhibits the futility and folly of fallen man. Aristotle's god is one god only if he is thought of as the result of saying that he is not this and is not that, in short only if he is nothing positive. When Aristotle's god is related to the world then he turns out to be many gods. That is to say Aristotle's god was an abstract impersonal principle attained by pure denial of any positive likeness to anything in this world. When he is brought into relation with the facts of the space time world the god of Aristotle is made correlative to it, like the convex and the concave sides of a disc are correlative to one another. One can see in the philosophy of Plotinus, the last great Greek philosopher, where this approach leads. It leads into meaningless mysticism. The god of Plotinus is high above all that can be said about him. He is one because he is and does nothing. And then, as Arthur Lovejoy says: "by a strange inversion of logic" this god becomes for no reason that anyone can say the overflowing source and fountain of all good.

Roman Catholicism

We saw during our first course that the Roman Catholic church has sought to make a synthesis of this Greek philosophy and Christianity. It is because Roman Catholicism does this that it cannot challenge the natural man to repentance from sin and to an acceptance of the Christ of the Scripture who finished his work of Salvation for his own through his death on the cross and through his resurrection from the dead.

Neo-Orthodoxy

We now look at the modern scene. At the time of the renaissance modern man declared his independence from the authority of the Roman Catholic church. This was in itself a good thing. They were getting the false church off their backs. They were at the same time trying to do something more. They were also trying to get God the creator-redeemer of men off their backs. They wanted to be "free" in their scientific inquiry. But they could not be free and could not properly engage in scientific research except they do so in terms of the God who owns and rules the world. Without the biblical teaching with respect to God who through Christ is man's creator redeemer, man can only afresh exhibit his folly as a scientist, as a philosopher and as a theologian. Without the idea of God and his plan being realized through the work of Christ and his Holy Spirit, all is chaos. Unless one first accepts on authority the picture of the world and of all that is

therein that is given us in Scripture, the scientist, the philosopher and the theologian are like a man who is trying to string an infinite number of beads, no two of which have holes in them.

To be sure non-Christian thinkers have made many discoveries about the relation of the facts to one another in the universe. This is the case because they are wrong and the Bible is true in what it says about God and his relation to the world. If the world were as a matter of fact what the apostate man assumes that it is, then no man could identify himself. Then he could not even begin his process of scientific learning. In that case there would be no law or order in the universe. Man would have to make his own laws. Paul pleads with the Greeks to accept Jesus Christ as the way, the truth, and the life. If they do, and only if they do, can they have an intelligible foundation for their science and philosophy. If they do not accept Christ as the way, the truth, and the life then all the fruits of their labor will be taken from them at last and they will finally see that they had to serve Christ as slaves instead of as free men in him. In short, in Jesus Christ alone man knows who he is and what freedom means. Stand fast therefore, says Paul, in the liberty wherewith Christ has made you free.

The New Slavery

Now what I fear is that your people are going to be led into a new form of slavery which is worse than any other slavery you have, by the unrighteousness of the white man, ever suffered. I am referring to the work of Dr. James H. Cone on *Black Theology and Black Power*. I speak from the conviction that what Paul said to the Greeks must be said to men today. The Greeks, together with all men fallen in Adam, were all their lifetime subject to the fear of death. They not only had not heard the gospel of Paul but they were holding under in unrighteousness the revelation of God within their own constitution and in the world about them. They had put a mask on their faces so they would not have to see, as they thought, the face of the creator-God. When they looked into a mirror they saw only the masks which they had cemented to their faces.

The philosophy to which Dr. Cone appeals in the interest of freedom is the same sort of philosophy as the philosophy of the Greeks. It is Immanuel Kant's philosophy that has set the tone for all subsequent schools of philosophy. This is true particularly of the I-thou—I-it philosophy to which Dr. Cone appeals.

Kant was even more insistent, if possible, than was Socrates that man must be his own final interpreter both of himself and of his world. Even more obviously

than did the Greeks, Kant holds that the world of fact is, at bottom, a world of pure contingency or change and that man must be his own logical interpreter both of himself and of his world. Even more obviously than did the Greeks, Kant holds that the world of fact is, at bottom, a world of pure contingency or change and that man must by his logical reasoning impress some sort of order upon it. This is obviously a meaningless procedure. It is as hopeless as was the task of Sisyphus when he had to roll a stone to the top of a hill only to see it roll down again, over and over, world without end. The Greeks had not heard the gospel of the Creator-Redeemer until Paul came to them. Kant and his followers have heard of this gospel. Many of Kant's followers, notably the theologians of modern times, assume that man and the universe are here by chance and that it is up to man to find his way in it. Now why should Dr. Cone seek help from this modern philosophy and theology which is itself like a leaky rowboat without supplies adrift on a bottomless and shoreless ocean of chance?

Chapter 1: Constructive Definition of Black Power

In his first chapter Dr. Cone undertakes to tell us what Black Power is. " 'Better to die on one's feet than to live on one's knees.' This is what Black Power means."

¹ Dr. Cone quotes from Camus's *Rebel*. The slave "act(s) in the name of certain values which ... he considers are common to himself and to all men." ²

At this point Cone turns to Paul Tillich for further clarification of what freedom means. Freedom is in Tillich's words " 'the courage to be' which is 'the ethical act in which man affirms his being in spite of those elements of his existence which conflict with his essential self-affirmation.' " Cone says, "Black Power, then, is a humanizing force because it is the black man's attempt to affirm his being, his attempt to be recognized as 'thou,' in spite of the 'other,' the white power which dehumanizes him. The structure of white society attempts to make 'black being' into 'nonbeing' or 'nothingness.' In existential philosophy, nonbeing is usually identified as that which threatens being; it is that ever-present possibility of the inability to affirm one's existence. The courage to be, then, is the courage to affirm one's being by striking out at the dehumanizing forces which threaten being. And, as Tillich goes on to say, 'He who is not capable of a powerful self-affirmation in spite of the anxiety of non-being is forced into a weak, reduced self-affirmation.' " ³

¹ p. 7.

² p. 7.

³ p. 7.

Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich is a profound philosopher and theologian, but he is not a believer in the gospel with which Paul confronted the Greeks. On the contrary, Tillich agrees with Kant that man must begin his thinking about himself and the world from himself as the ultimate point of reference. Tillich is in agreement with Kant's view of the "phenomenal world" (the I-it dimension) to the effect that nothing absolute can take place in it.

Tillich simply assumes that the biblical story of man's being created in the image of God and as having sinned against the expressed will of God at the beginning of history is not because it cannot be true. For Tillich the idea that Jesus Christ, the man who walked in Palestine, must be directly identified with Christ as the Son of God is intolerable. How could the depth of the mystery of being be exhaustively and finally set forth in a form of words that man has produced and man can understand. How could a revelation pretending to be final and comprehensive help but do injustice to the freedom of man. Freedom is the very nature of man's being. If taken as direct historical revelation, the biblical story of creation, fall and redemption is an insult to the very dignity of man as free. In short, together with post-Kantian philosophers in general, Tillich holds that what we have spoken of as Paul's message to the Greeks cannot be true.

Tillich reinterprets the Christian religion and, therefore, what he speaks of as the Protestant principle in terms of a Kantian type of philosophy. "Protestantism," says Tillich, "is understood as a special historical embodiment of a universally significant principle." Also, "Protestantism as a principle is eternal and a permanent criterion of everything temporal. Protestantism as the characteristic of a historical period is temporal and subjected to the eternal Protestant principle."⁴ By his reinterpretation of historic Protestantism Tillich intends to overcome all conflict between neo-orthodoxy and liberalism even as he intends the total rejection of historic Protestantism.

When Cone appeals to Tillich he appeals, indeed, to a very great theologian and philosopher. But, together with other great post-Kantian philosophers, Tillich simply assumes that man is what he is as sufficient to himself. According to Tillich man is free from the Creator-Redeemer God of the Bible. Tillich does not seem to realize that this makes him a slave to a world of chance. On Tillich's view even the

⁴ Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, p. 12.

laws of logic with which man's mind must operate are derived from and have their final dependence on a world of chance.

Basic to everything that the Reformers taught was that through the work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Son of man, salvation was actually accomplished for his people in history. The Reformers stressed the finished character of Christ's work over against the Roman Catholic notion of that work as an ever on-going process. Controlled in large measure by Greek thinking the Roman Catholic church thought of all reality as one process. The Roman Catholic view of the church is, therefore, the continuation of the incarnation.

Influenced largely by Kant's philosophy such theologians as Tillich again think of all reality as one process in which man goes onward and upward from a stage that is near non-being to every higher stage and forever approaching but never reaching pure being. In other words salvation is for the modern Protestant as is for Roman Catholicism, an upward movement from a colorless, amorphous being toward more definite, and therefore better, being. On this view Christ is for some unknowable reason the motor power of this process. Man's freedom is freedom in Christ because man participates with Christ in the upward surge of all reality toward the divine.

Tillich's Protestantism is, if possible, more definitely opposed to the Protestantism of the Reformers than is Roman Catholicism. This is because the philosophy of Kant on which modern Protestantism is based is more activist than is the philosophy of Aristotle on which the theology of Roman Catholicism is based.

The theology of new-Protestantism offers man freedom but it offers man freedom from God his Creator and from Christ his Redeemer. In doing so new-Protestantism leads man back into slavery in which every man finds himself when he seeks to be free apart from the freedom wherewith Christ has made him free. Tillich's man may think it takes courage to be in the face of non-being. In reality it is an evil courage when man seeks to be free by seeking escape from the ordinance of God for him as the creature of God. The free man of Tillich's thought is as much an exile from the presence of God as was Adam when he was driven out of paradise. Worse than that, the free man of Tillich's thought has sought his freedom by spurning the death of Christ on the cross of Calvary as the only means by which he might be set free from the wrath and curse of God.⁵

⁵ cf. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*.

Dr. Cone says, "Black consciousness is the key to the black man's emancipation from his distorted self-image."⁶ But, surely back of black consciousness is human consciousness. How can man know who he is, and what he is if he starts with the idea that he is unknowable non-being to unknowable being. Why does Cone not follow the Reformers, and especially Calvin, when he says that man knows himself only if, in the act of knowing himself, he, at the same time, knows his Creator-Redeemer God in the Christ of the Scriptures? Freedom is to be found in terms of the traditional but not in terms of the neo-orthodox Protestant principle.

"Is the black man in white society a 'Thou' or an 'It'?" asks Cone. We answer he is a thou, but when Cone looks for a framework of thought in terms of which this is true, he should look for it not in a philosophy like that of Tillich but in a theology like that of Calvin.

Karl Jaspers

Cone builds the broadest possible foundation for his conception of freedom. He wants to show in particular that the idea of slavery flies in the face of the most elementary notion of man's sense of responsibility. He, therefore, quotes the great existentialist philosopher to the effect that every human being " 'shares responsibility for every injustice and every wrong committed in the world, and especially for crimes that are committed in his presence or of which he cannot be ignorant.' "⁷

Meanwhile, when we look into Jasper's philosophy, we soon discover that he builds this high-sounding philosophy of universal responsibility on a view of man and the world in which the very idea of human personality, and with it, of human responsibility is squelched.

That this is the case is immediately apparent from the fact that Jaspers reduces the only man, in whom absolute righteousness and a sense of absolute responsibility and compassion has appeared since the fall, namely Jesus Christ, to the level of such men as Socrates, Buddha and Confucius.⁸ The suffering of Christ on the cross was not a substitutionary suffering for those he had come to

⁶ p. 19.

⁷ p. 24.

⁸ Karl Jaspers, *Die Grossen Philosophen*, Erster Band.

redeem. It was merely an instance of the Jewish experience of suffering as expressed in Psalm 22.⁹

Accordingly, the suffering of Christ did not because it could not accomplish the establishment, even in principle, of absolute responsibility and compassion in the heart of any man.

Cone may through the voice of Jaspers, call out to every man for absolute responsibility and compassion but he has at the same time taken away the foundation for anything that resembles such a thing. By his death and resurrection Christ has brought true responsibility to life and light in the hearts of those whom he has redeemed. They are saved by the free grace of God and now are free, free to love their fellow man, of whatever race, as themselves. Everyone of them still falls far short of accepting his responsibilities "for others." Even so they, and they alone, are "free for others."

To expect a true sense of compassion to spring from the hearts of fallen mankind in general is, at best, self-deception. To be sure, there is much love and compassion operating among fallen men in general, even though they are, deep down in their hearts, haters of God and of man, but even this general love and compassion springs from the work of Christ. Christ is the source of general as well as of saving or special grace.

To build a foundation for his universal sense of responsibility, Jaspers first wipes out the person and work of Christ, and all that it presupposes with respect to man's creation and fall, in biblical teaching. As such it is inherently futile and meaningless. Jasper's view of responsibility presupposes a view of man as sprung from chance projecting an ideal for himself in a world of which he has never known and never will know anything. Socrates, Jesus, Buddha and Confucius know no more of this ideal than does any other man. Other men simply place them on a pedestal so that their pointings into the realm of the unknown might be easily visible to other men. Even so, these moulders of men, sink together with all other men into the bottomless ocean from which they, together with all men have, by chance, emerged. Does Cone really think that he can be of help to his people by invoking the help of helpless and hopeless men?

Jean-Paul Sartre

⁹ Jaspers, p. 206.

Cone says, "A man is free when he can determine the style of his existence in an absurd world; a man is free when he sees himself for what he is and not as others define him. He is free when he determines the limits of his existence. And in this sense Sartre is right: 'man is freedom'; or better yet, man 'is condemned to be free.' A man is free when he accepts the responsibility for his own acts and knows that they involve not merely himself but all men. No one can 'give' or 'help get' freedom in that sense."¹⁰

Here, Cone thinks, is freedom indeed. He might have pointed out that Jean-Paul Sartre carries out the implications of the I-thou—I-it philosophy more consistently, if possible, than other existentialists have done. To be a person and not a thing, existence must precede essence. "If existence really does precede essence," says Sartre, "there is no explaining things away by reference to a fixed and given nature. In other words, there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom. On the other had, if God does not exist, we find no values or commands to turn to which legitimize our conduct. So, in the bright realm of values, we have no excuse behind us, nor justification before us. We are alone, with no excuses.

That is the idea I shall try to convey when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned because he did not create himself, yet, in other respects is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does."¹¹

"Ponge in a very fine article has said, 'Man is the future of man.' That's exactly it. But if it is taken to mean that this future is recorded in heaven, that God sees it, then it is false, because it would really no longer be a future."¹²

Is this pure subjectivity, as some have charged? Well, Sartre replies, "Subjectivity of the individual is indeed our point of departure, and this for strictly philosophical reasons."¹³ "There can be no other truth to take off from than this: I think; therefore, I exist."¹⁴ Here only do we have "a firm hold on the true. Therefore, before there can be any truth whatsoever, there must be an absolute truth; and this one is simple and easily arrived at; it is on everyone's doorstep; it's a matter of grasping it directly."¹⁵

¹⁰ p. 28.

¹¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism*, p. 27.

¹² *Existentialism*, p. 28.

¹³ p. 42.

¹⁴ *Existentialism*, p. 43.

¹⁵ *Existentialism*, p. 43.

"Secondly, this theory is the only one which gives man dignity, the only one which does not reduce him to an object."¹⁶

Still further, when we thus learn to regard ourselves in our true freedom and dignity, our true "thou" by our assertion of our own absolute independence from God and his plan for our future then we at the same time also see other men as selves instead as things: "The other is indispensable to my own existence, as well as to my knowledge about myself. This being so, in discovering my inner being I discover the other person at the same time, like a freedom placed in front of me which thinks and wills only for or against me. Hence, let us at once announce the discovery of a world which we shall call inter-subjectivity; this is the world in which man decides what he is and what others are."¹⁷

We must, says Sartre, go still further. If we follow out our motto that existence precedes essence, then and accordingly find our own true, free selves and that of others, then we also find the "universal human condition." "It's not by chance that today's thinkers speak more readily of man's condition than of his nature. By condition they mean, more or less definitely, the *a priori* limits which outline man's fundamental situation in the universe. Historical situations vary; a man may be born a slave in a pagan society or a feudal lord or a proletarian. What does not vary is the necessity for him to exist in the world, to be at work there, to be there in the midst of other people, and to be mortal there."¹⁸ This necessity implies that all men can understand each other. "In this sense we may say that there is a universality in man; but it is not given, it is perpetually being made. I build the universal in choosing myself; I build it in understanding the configuration of every other man, whatever age he might have lived in."¹⁹

"Consequently, when, in all honesty I've recognized that man is a being in whom existence precedes essence, that he is a free being who, in various circumstances, can want only his freedom, I have at the same time recognized that I can want only the freedom of others."²⁰

Sartre is admirably honest when at the conclusion of his essay he says: "Existentialism is nothing else than an attempt to draw all the consequences of a coherent atheistic position." Atheism simply declares "that even if God did exist,

¹⁶ *Existentialism*, p. 43.

¹⁷ *Existentialism*, p. 44–45.

¹⁸ *Existentialism*, p. 45.

¹⁹ *Existentialism*, p. 47.

²⁰ *Existentialism*, p. 54, 55.

that would change nothing. There you've got our point of view. Not that we believe that God exists, but we think that the problem of His existence is not the issue."²¹

Would that Cone had understood the significance of his appeal to such existentialists as Tillich, Jaspers and especially Sartre. Sartre frankly places us before a choice. We must accept the historic Christian view of man and his world or we must accept the modern post-Kantian view of man and his world. In the former case we seek our salvation, our freedom, in Christ who set us free from the guilt of disobedience to our Creator-Redeemer God. In the second case we seek our salvation, our freedom, in ourselves. In the former case we seek our very self-awareness as free in our awareness of the forgiveness of our sins against our maker. In the second case we seek our self-awareness "from pure philosophical necessity," in ourselves as free from our Creator-Redeemer God.

When we make the second choice we seek our freedom from the confinement of the ocean-liner by jumping over board, only to be devoured by sharks. Then we are indeed condemned to be free. To be free, truly free, for Sartre, the God of Christianity is irrelevant. In effect he is saying that this sort of God cannot exist. To be free men, and particularly to be free in relation to others, man must assert that in his very first act of self-awareness he knows that the God of Christianity cannot exist while a self-subsistent universally necessary situation does exist. Sartre's philosophy is a typically modern way of saying essentially the same thing that the Greeks said. That is to say man must, to know himself as a person, assume his ultimacy or autonomy and then in order to relate himself to the world of men and things he must assume that a pure contentless principle of universality or being, and a pure contentless principle of individuality or non-being must be taken as correlative to one another and then, taken together as correlative to the pure contentless principle of man's autonomy.

Cone has, together with modern I-thou—I-it philosophy assumed that the historic Christian view is so obviously wrong as not even to deserve mention in his struggle to find true freedom for his people. Cone uncritically accepts a view of reality which is utterly destructive of the only freedom that exists in the world, the freedom wherewith the Christ of Luther and of Calvin, the Christ of Paul's gospel, sets men free. This way lies slavery, slavery to sin. This way leads to eternal slavery; i.e., unrelieved hatred of God, the other self, and the original self.

²¹ *Existentialism*, p. 61.

Chapter 2: The Gospel Of Jesus, Black People, And Black Power

In the second chapter of his book Dr. Cone examines "what contemporary theologians are saying."¹ He says, "contemporary theology from Karl Barth to Jürgen Moltmann conceives of the theological task as one which speaks from within the covenant community with the sole purpose of making the gospel meaningful to the times in which men live. While the gospel itself does not change, every generation is confronted with new problems, and the gospel must be brought to bear on them."²

Unfortunately we find that "contemporary theologians are silent about the enslaved condition of black people."³ "There is, then, a desperate need for a black theology, a theology whose sole purpose is to apply the freeing power of the gospel to black people under white oppression."⁴ "There is, then, a need for a theology whose sole purpose is to emancipate the gospel from its 'whiteness' so that blacks may be capable of making an honest self-affirmation through Jesus Christ."⁵ Cone asks, "Is it possible for men to be really black and still feel any identity with the biblical tradition expressed in the Old and New Testaments?"⁶ "Finally, is Black Power, as described in Chapter 1, compatible with the Christian faith, or are we dealing with two utterly divergent perspectives?"⁷

What then is "the gospel of Jesus as it relates to black people."⁸ Well, Cone says, "Jesus is the man for others who views his existence as inextricably tied to other men to the degree that his own Person is inexplicable apart from others. The others, of course, refer to all men, especially the oppressed, the unwanted of society, the 'sinners.' He is God himself coming into the depths of human existence for the sole purpose of striking off the chains of slavery, thereby freeing man from ungodly principalities and powers that hinder his relationship with God."⁹ "Jesus' work is essentially one of liberation. Becoming a slave himself, he opens realities of human existence formerly closed to man. Through an

¹ p. 31.

² p. 31.

³ p. 31.

⁴ p. 31.

⁵ p. 32.

⁶ p. 33.

⁷ p. 33.

⁸ p. 33.

⁹ p. 35.

encounter with Jesus, man now knows the full meaning of God's action in history and man's place within it." ¹⁰ "Is not this why God became man in Jesus Christ so that man might become what he is? Is not this at least a part of what St. Paul had in mind when he said, 'For freedom, Christ has set us free?' (Gal 5:1) As long as man is a slave to another power, he is not free to serve God with mature responsibility. He is not free to become what he is—human." ¹¹ "The Good News is that God in Christ has freed us; we need no longer be enslaved by alien forces. The battle was fought and won on Good Friday and the triumph was revealed to men at Easter." ¹²

As we reflect on this argument of Cone's the following remarks are in order. In the first chapter Cone has given us his "constructive definition of black power" in terms of the framework of modern post-Kantian I-thou—I-it philosophy. Now in the second chapter he seeks help for the realization of his program of establishing black power by means of post-Kantian I-thou—I-it theology. Cone is eminently consistent in thus relating modern I-thou—I-it philosophy to modern I-thou—I-it theology.

Secondly Cone is also basically right in pointing out that the gospel as understood by neo-orthodoxy, notably by Karl Barth, is the same as the gospel as understood by old liberalism, notably by Friedrich Schleiermacher. In particular Cone is on good ground when he, to all intents and purposes identifies the "Christ" of Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith* with—the Christ of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. Barth militated against Schleiermacher's "theology of consciousness" in many of his earlier writings but in his later life softened his opposition to Schleiermacher. And why should he not? Together they are opposed, utterly opposed to the Christ of traditional orthodox Protestant theology.

What's wrong with orthodox theology? Orthodoxy believes in the direct identification of revelation with what Scripture teaches on the creation, the fall and the redemption of man through Christ. It might appear, at first glance that with his emphasis on the revelation of God as the proper starting point for theology Barth's view is more like that of Calvin than is that of Schleiermacher. But such is not the case. Barth's God is nothing more than a projection into the world of the unknown (Kant's noumenal realm) of the independent self-consciousness of would-be-autonomous man. Barth, as well as Schleiermacher follows Kant, in making the inwardly self-sufficient man the source and reference

¹⁰ p. 35.

¹¹ p. 39.

¹² p. 40.

point of all human speech. The “theological” starting point of Barth is not basically different from the frankly atheistic man-centered starting point of Barth. In his *New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, Herman Dooyeweerd brings out this point.¹³

Such being the case the “freedom” of God is, for Barth, the freedom to turn into the opposite of himself, i.e. to become wholly and exhaustively man in order then to take man up into participation with his own self-existent being. God is the history of the salvation of all mankind¹⁴

We must begin with Christ and his finished work for all men.¹⁵ All men are men because they are fellow-men with Jesus. To be man is, for other men, to be together with God. No sin can exclude us from our election in Christ.

Such then is the ground-form of humanity. In *Geschichte* there is the true identity of God and man, even as there we have the priority of God over man. Godlessness is, accordingly an “ontological impossibility.” “Being in sin, being in Godlessness is a being against our human being.”¹⁶

Christ is the one who has, from all eternity borne the wrath of God for all men. Man is to be defined as that being who is the object of God’s grace. To be man is to have experienced redemption. “The Lord, the call of God to all and every man, is the existence of the man Jesus.” God’s grace is the meaning of the man Jesus, and God’s grace is that which in him is directed to all men. That which constitutes the existence of men is the fact that there is among them one man, the man Jesus, to whom God says that he is gracious to him.¹⁷ It was Jesus Christ, alone true man, who alone was rejected of God.¹⁸ Therefore the rejection of all other men is inherently rejected by God.

In all this Barth is telling us that God’s grace is both sovereign and universal. It is obvious, however that the meaning of this all comprehensive notion of the sovereign universal grace of God is that of post-Kantian personalistic philosophy. The God and the Christ as well as the “man” of this philosophy are all three of them in all their relations to one another, the opposite of the God, the Christ and the man of the Reformers and of Paul.

¹³ Vol 1, p. 155. See my *Christianity and Barthianism*, p. 177.

Kirchliche Dogmatik, Vol. 3, p. 81.

¹⁵ *objektiv für uns geschehene Heilsgeschichte*, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Vol 4, p. 250.

¹⁶ References in *Christianity and Barthianism*.

¹⁷ *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Vol. 2, p. 196.

¹⁸ *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Vol. 2, p. 506.

Accordingly Cone is not on good ground when he speaks of Good Friday and of Easter as turning points in the work of Christ. According to Barth's framework of thought of absolute significance can happen in the world of ordinary space and time. This world is for Barth the world of *Historie* as distinct from the world of *Geschichte*. These terms mean much the same thing as the world of the phenomenal and the noumenal for Kant and as the world of I-it or thing relations and the world of I-thou or person relations mean for recent existentialist philosophy. Revelation is for Barth primarily a matter of *Geschichte*. Revelation is historical, but history is never revelational. That is to say, nothing that happened in the field of ordinary history must be taken to be directly identical with the revelational activity of God.

Barth says that he has actualized the idea of the incarnation. The divine and the human natures must not be thought of as distinct from one another. God has always been participant in man as man has always been participant in God. Accordingly Christ's steps of exaltation did not follow in ordinary history the steps of his humiliation. All reality is in the eternal Present.

It is thus that Barth has crucified the crucifixion and the resurrection as well as the incarnation of Christ afresh and put him to an open shame.

Cone is not well advised if he seeks help for his effort to find freedom for the black man by means of either the theology of Schleiermacher or the theology of Barth.

All men since the fall are slaves to sin. It is only if men's sins are actually washed in the blood of Christ that they are made free from sin. It is only if God by sovereign, electing grace takes men out of the mass of perdition that they can treat their fellow-men as they ought to be treated.

Cone will never get the white man off his back unless he lets the white man get the burden of sin off his back. And Cone will never get freedom for the black man till the black man too gets the burden of sin off his. Only when the black man and the white man, each for himself, seeks forgiveness for all his sins through the work of Christ on Calvary and by the power of the Holy Spirit will they treat each other as equals. Only then will each of them by himself and then the two of them together make "an honest self-affirmation through Jesus Christ." Only then will each treat the other as equal.

If Cone got everything he wants for the black man, even if he got complete supremacy of power for the black man over the white man his black man would be in deeper slavery than ever unless he got the wrath of God off his back.

The Christ of neo-orthodoxy to which Cone appeals for help is "himself" a slave driven back and forth blindly between an abstract universal principle of rationality and an abstract universal principle of irrationality. The Christ of neo-orthodoxy is a figment of the imagination of man who tries to escape facing the actual state of affairs with respect to his own slavery. The Christ of Barth is as helpless to help either others or himself as is the man of Sartre who springs by chance from the bottomless ocean of chaos, condemned to be free by saying in pure *a priori* fashion that the Christ of Paul cannot exist.

Chapter 3: The White Church And Black Power And Chapter 4: The Black Church And Black Power

We must from this point on be very brief. There is much factual material in the remaining chapters of Cone's book which the present writer cannot pretend to control. Besides, the main purpose of our discussion has been accomplished. We have been concerned to plead with Dr. Cone not to lead his people into the bondage house of modern theology but to bring them the gospel of true freedom through the death and resurrection of Christ as the Reformers proclaimed.

In chapters three and four Cone speaks of the Church. Having listened to his commitment to the Christ-Event of modern theology we are not surprised now to listen to his commitment to the neo-orthodox view of the church. "Contemporary theology from Karl Barth to Jürgen Moltmann," says Cone, "conceives of the theological task as one which speaks within the covenant community with the sole purpose of making the gospel meaningful to the times in which we live."¹

The church is the "covenant community." But there are two mutually exclusive views of the covenant, the traditional Reformed one and the post-Kantian one. Cone chooses for the latter. His "covenant community" like that of neo-orthodox theologians, is a community in which would-be-autonomous man makes covenant with his projected Christ to live the good life. It is this kind of covenant community for which modern I-thou—I-it philosophy provides. Jesus is the motor power that moves this covenant community onward and upward toward the

¹ p. 31.

heights of humanitarian accomplishment. Jesus helps the covenant community to realize its potential. "Jesus' work is essentially one of liberation. Becoming a slave himself, he opens realities of human existence formerly closed to man. Through an encounter with Jesus, man now knows the full meaning of God's action in history and man's place within it."² Thus, as Bonhoeffer, carrying out the principles of modern theology further than his predecessors, tells us: Christ is the man for others.

Cone says that through an encounter with Christ man "knows the full meaning of God's action in history." But, of course, no one knows anything about God in the way we know things in the temporal-spatial world. To know about God we must have a personal encounter with him instead of knowing him conceptually. God is wholly other than man. We have a different kind of "knowledge" of God than we have of the world. But yet we also know the action of this God in history. And then we are back to the idea of ordinary knowledge. And we know that any action that takes place in history (*Historie*) is what it is because we ourselves as men have impressed our conceptual scheme upon the realm of pure chance. Thus there are two kinds of being—I-it being and I-thou being that are wholly opposite of one another, that must yet be known as standing in relation to one another. Moreover, the I-thou world must be known to be "above" the I-it world. The I-thou world, and the God who lives there, must somehow influence the I-it world for its progress toward perfection. But what is perfection? In the nature of the case no one knows. What are the "realities of human existence" which are opened up by man's encounter with Jesus? And who or what is Jesus? No one knows. What could the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus mean either for himself or for other men? Can Bonhoeffer put any intelligible meaning into his words when he says that Jesus is the man for others? Can any of the I-thou—I-it theologians tell us how the position of the God-is-dead theologians or the position of Sartre differs from their own? Can the God-is-dead theologians tell us why they do not call themselves Christ-is-dead theologians?

Cone grasps in desperation at Jürgen Moltmann's words when he speaks of the "political hermeneutics of the gospel."³ "If the gospel of Christ, as Moltmann suggests, frees a man to be for those who labor and are heavy laden, the humiliated and the abused, then it would seem that for Twentieth Century America the message of Black Power is the message of Christ himself."⁴ We must believe the New Testament with respect to the resurrection of Jesus. " ... Jesus as

² p. 35.

³ p. 37.

⁴ p. 37.

resurrected and thus active even now ... alive in those very men who are struggling in the midst of misery and humiliation.”⁵ (That is the message of Black Power). The resurrected Jesus active in us now. That is our message. And Jesus is God. So through Jesus we become participant in God. “Is this not why God became man in Jesus Christ so that man might become what he is?”⁶ “And if Christ is present today actively risking all for the freedom of man, he must be acting through the most radical elements of Black Power,”⁷ “Therefore, when blacks assert their freedom in self-determination, whites too are liberated. They must now confront the black man as a person.”⁸

Now “the Church is that people called into being by the power and love of God to share in his revolutionary activity for the liberation of man.”⁹ Surely Bonhoeffer was right when he said: “It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world.”¹⁰

Now what about the “white church.” Has it sought thus to be “Christ to the world?”¹¹ The answer is No! “If the real Church is the people of God, whose primary task is that of being Christ to the world, by proclaiming the message of the gospel (*Kerygma*), by rendering services of liberation (*diakonia*), and by being itself a manifestation of the nature of the new society (*koinonia*), then the empirical institutionalized white church has failed on all counts.”¹²

Even the contemporary theologians have failed: “As with the Church as a whole, theology remains conspicuously silent regarding the place of the black man in American society.”¹³ There are a few who speak but they are “usually unclear.”¹⁴ “It would seem that it is time for theology to make a radical break with its identity with the world by seeking to bring to the problem of color the revolutionary implications of the gospel of Christ.” It is time for theologians to relate work to life-and-death issues, which deal with the dehumanization of

⁵ p. 38.

⁶ p. 39.

⁷ p. 41.

⁸ p. 41.

⁹ p. 63.

¹⁰ p. 66.

¹¹ p. 71.

¹² p. 71.

¹³ p. 83.

¹⁴ p. 83.

blacks in America.”¹⁵ “For the sickness of the Church in America is intimately involved with the bankruptcy of American theology.”¹⁶ “The church cannot remain aloof from the world, because Christ is in the world. Theology, then, if it is to serve the need of the Church, must become ‘worldly theology.’ ”¹⁷ “Theology is not, then, an intellectual exercise but a worldly risk.”¹⁸

In saying all this Cone is conscious of the fact that he is following the later Barth, the Barth of *The Humanity of God*, rather than the earlier Barth, the Barth whose God was wholly other than man. With Bonhoeffer he goes beyond Barth in bringing out that the essence of Christ is to be the man for others. After that Cone goes beyond the neo-orthodox theologians by stressing the identity of the work of Christ with that visualized by the black consciousness.

And what of the Black Church? Well, it at least was unconsciously aware of the need for recognizing the fact that their struggle for freedom from slavery was identical with the struggle of God through Christ within them. Their spirituals were, to be sure, otherworldly. They spoke of the land flowing with milk and honey. But this otherworldliness was merely an expression of the fact the “Whites completely destroyed their hopes in this world ... ”¹⁹ Besides, not all their spirituals are “otherworldly, and compensatory. Some are protesting and rebellious in character (“When Israel was in Egypt’s land, Let my people go ... ”).²⁰

The birth of the independent black churches and the teaching of the free black preachers show clearly that Christianity and earthly freedom were inseparable for the black man. The black church was born in protest. In this sense, it is the precursor of Black Power. Unlike the white church, its reality stemmed from the eschatological recognition that freedom and equality are at the essence of Christianity, and thus segregation and slavery are diametrically opposed to Christianity.²¹

But, sad to say in more recent times “the black church failed to maintain its freedom from white controls.”²² Thus: “We may conclude that except in rare instances, the black churches in the post-Civil War period have been no more Christian than their white counterparts. The rare instances refer chiefly to the

¹⁵ p. 83.

¹⁶ p. 83.

¹⁷ p. 84.

¹⁸ p. 84.

¹⁹ p. 93.

²⁰ p. 93.

²¹ p. 94.

²² p. 108.

work of a few black ministers in the non-violence movement, with the late Martin Luther King, Jr. as their leader.”²³

Because of King’s work we are now in the beginning stages of real confrontation between black and white Americans. He may not have endorsed the concept of Black Power, but its existence is the result of his work. Black Power advocates are men who were inspired by his zeal for freedom, and Black Power is their attempt to make his dream a reality. If the black church organizations want to remain faithful to the New Testament gospel and to the great tradition of the pre-Civil War black church, they must relinquish their stake in white society by identifying exclusively with Black Power. Black Power is the only hope of the black church in America.²⁴

The existence of the church is grounded exclusively in Christ. And in twentieth-century America, Christ means Black Power.²⁵

What a pity it is “that the major institutional black churches have not caught the Spirit of Black Power. They have, for the most part, strayed from their calling, seeking instead to pattern their life after white models.”²⁶

Even so, “It is clear that there are creative possibilities in the black church which seem to be absent from its white counterpart. The black church has a heritage of radical involvement in the world.”²⁷

Let the black church then arise. “Today we enter a new era, the era of Black Power. It is an age of rebellion and revolution. Blacks are no longer prepared to turn the other cheek; instead they are turning the gun.”²⁸ “Now the question is: what do black churches have to say about this? It is time for the black churches to change their style and join the suffering of the black masses, proclaiming the gospel of the black Christ. Whether they will do this or not is not clear now. What is clear is that they are poised at the moment of irrevocable decision, between costly obedience and confirmed apostacy.”²⁹

²³ p. 188.

²⁴ p. 109.

²⁵ p. 112.

²⁶ p. 112.

²⁷ p. 112.

²⁸ p. 119.

²⁹ p. 114.

"The Rev. Albert Cleage of Detroit is one of the few black ministers who has embraced Black Power as a religious concept and has sought to re-orient the church community on the basis of it." ³⁰

Chapter 5: Some Perspectives Of Black Theology

Our comment on Cone's view has already been partly expressed and partly implied. Further comment may better be made after a consideration of the arguments of the last two chapters. These chapters take us back to the theology underlying Cone's view of the church.

Having expressed with the Rev. Cleage's implementation of Black Theology in his church Cone asserts: "The task of Black Theology, then, is to analyze the black man's condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ with the purpose of creating a new understanding of black dignity among black people, and providing the necessary soul in that people to destroy white racism." ¹

"The purpose of Black Theology is to analyze the nature of Christian faith in such a way that black people can say Yes to blackness and No to whiteness and mean it." ²

"Black Theology must speak to and for black people as they seek to remove the structures of white power which hover over their being stripping it of its blackness." ³ To say this, says Cone, is not to say Black Theology means to deny "the absolute revelation of God in Christ. Rather, it means that Black Theology firmly believes that God's revelation in Christ can be made supreme only by affirming Christ as he is alive in black people today. Black Theology is Christian theology precisely because it has the black predicament as its point of departure. It calls upon black people to affirm God because he has affirmed us. His affirmation of black people is made known not only in his election of oppressed Israel, but more especially in his coming to us and being rejected in Christ for us. The event of Christ tells us that the oppressed blacks are his people because, and only because, they represent who he is." ⁴

³⁰ p. 116.

¹ p. 117.

² p. 117.

³ p. 118.

⁴ p. 118.

At this juncture Cone finds it convenient to introduce the question of authority. He seems to sense his readers' restlessness with respect to this matter. Has he not made the black consciousness his absolute starting point in as absolute a sense as Descartes made his *cogito ergo sum* his absolute starting point or as Sartre has made his absolutely self-sufficient sense of freedom his starting point. Is he not telling his God, and his Christ what he must be in order to satisfy the self-diagnosed black consciousness?

For help on this matter Cone wisely appeals to neo-orthodox theologians, including their false claim to "represent the Reformation theology of the sixteenth century as expressed in Luther and Calvin."⁵

Following the example of neo-orthodox theologians Cone has no difficulty starting with the black consciousness as a self-intelligent absolute and combining that with the revelation of God in Christ as an absolute. He simply postulates their identity. Working from the principle of the self-sufficient inwardness of the human consciousness in general and of the black consciousness in particular Cone projects his Christ as his ideal self into the unknown and then calls on all men to worship him. This is the way to slavery for the black man as well as for the white man. Their equality will be equality in terms of the false Christ of neo-orthodox theology.

And it is this Christ, in terms of which Cone pronounces the Christ of Luther and Calvin to be the Christ of apostate man.

True, in words, Cone identifies these two Christs. He even claims to worship the Christ of Luther and Calvin. But as Cone calls upon the black church no longer to halt between two Christs, we beg him to forsake his false Christ. His Christ is a figment of his imagination. If the black church heeds his call to follow this false Christ, they will insult the Christ of Luther and of Calvin. In that case the wrath of the Lamb abides upon them.

Cone calls us all away from the "abstract debate" about authority "among fundamentalists, liberalists, and neo-orthodox thinkers."⁶ Black Theology, he says, "sees a prior authority that unites all black people and transcends these theological differences. It is this common experience among black people in America that Black Theology elevates as the supreme test of truth. To put it

⁵ p. 119.

⁶ p. 120.

simply Black Theology knows no authority more binding than the experience of oppression itself. This alone must be the ultimate authority in religious matters.”¹

Concretely, this means that Black Theology is not prepared to accept any doctrine of God, man, Christ, or Scripture which contradicts the black demand for freedom now. It believes that any religious idea which exalts black dignity and creates a restless drive for freedom must be affirmed. All ideas which are opposed to the struggle for black self-affirmation or are irrelevant to it must be rejected as the work of the Anti-Christ.²

Again, this does not mean that Black Theology makes the experience of Christ secondary to the experience of black oppression. Rather, it means that black people have come to know Christ precisely through oppression, because he has made himself synonymous with black oppression. Therefore, to deny the reality of black oppression and to affirm some other ‘reality’ is to deny Christ.³

Black Theology is not prepared to discuss the doctrine of God, man, Christ, Church, Holy Spirit—the whole spectrum of Christian theology—without making each doctrine an analysis of the emancipation of black people.⁴

If black people will accept this Black Theology, Cone argues, they will not need to sing Spirituals about heaven any more. “The idea of heaven is irrelevant for Black Theology.” To accept Black Theology is to live beyond the field of threats and rewards. This is what a theology of the Sovereign grace of God really means.⁵ “With a black perspective, eschatology comes to mean joining the world and making it what it ought to be.”⁶

Chapter 6: Revolution, Violence, And Reconciliation In Black Theology

Black Theology is a biblical theology. It creates new value perspectives. These value perspectives are what they are in terms of the free man in Christ. “Like biblical theology” Black Theology, “affirms the absolute sovereignty of God over his creation. This means that ultimate allegiance belongs only to God.”⁷ It is this

¹ p. 120.

² p. 120.

³ p. 120.

⁴ p. 121.

⁵ p. 125.

⁶ p. 126.

⁷ p. 137.

direct allegiance to God that not only sets one free but obliges him "to break all laws which contradict human dignity."⁸

"The biblical emphasis on the freedom of man also means that one cannot allow another to define his existence."⁹ Bonhoeffer has shown us to reject any such thing as "an absolute standard to right and wrong."¹⁰ To "assume that one has knowledge of good and evil is to ignore the fall of man. It assumes that doing the will of God means obeying a system of rules, a pattern of life."¹¹

Accordingly "in dealing with the question of violence and black people, Black Theology does not begin by assuming that this question can be answered merely by looking at the Western distinction between right and wrong. It begins by looking at the face of black America in the light of Jesus Christ."¹²

Black people now know who they are. They are the representatives of Christ. "Black people know who they are; and to know who you are is to set limits on your being. It means that any act of oppression will be met with an almighty Halt! Any act of freedom will be met with an almighty Advance! This is the mood of black America which gives rise to black theology."¹³

What then of violence? The answer is: "Black theology realizes that violence *per se* is not the primary question. Violence is a 'subordinate and relative question' "¹⁴ "Violence already exists."¹⁵ "The Christian," therefore, "does not decide between violence and non-violence, evil and good. He decides between the less and the greater evil. He must ponder whether revolutionary violence is less or more deplorable than the violence perpetuated by the system. There are no absolute rules which can decide the answer with certainty. But he must make a choice. If he decides to take the 'non-violent' way, then he is saying that revolutionary violence is more detrimental to man in the long run than systemic violence. But if the system is evil, then revolutionary violence is both justified and necessary."¹⁶

⁸ p. 137.

⁹ p. 137.

¹⁰ p. 140.

¹¹ p. 140.

¹² p. 141.

¹³ p. 141–142.

¹⁴ p. 142.

¹⁵ p. 143.

¹⁶ p. 143.

And whether the system is evil or that, according to Cone, the black consciousness as the final standard, must be the judge.

At this point Cone again calls himself to a halt. Is not the biblical way, the way of Jesus, that of reconciliation? Indeed, "Do not misunderstand me. Black Theology is a theology which takes seriously God's reconciling act in Christ. In fact the heart of the New Testament message is the gospel of reconciliation."¹⁷

But this message of reconciliation must not be taken as an abstraction. It must be made "contemporaneous with the black situation in America."¹⁸

Let us ask Karl Barth to show us how this must be done. Barth teaches us what reconciliation taken concretely means. "Reconciliation means that God has changed the God-man relationship by making the cause of the creature the Creator's cause. The incarnation means that reconciliation is no longer hoped for but is a reality; it is a reality because God has done for man what man was powerless to do for himself. Basically, this means a restoration of diseased humanity. It means that man can now be what he is—a creature made for fellowship with God."¹⁹

And then, "to be reconciled with God involves reconciliation with the neighbor."²⁰ "The Christian community is inseparable from the work of the Holy Spirit. It is that community which accepts God's justification of man in Christ and is thus prepared to live as justified men."²¹

But let us not be hasty. Let us not jump to the conclusion that all this involves the status quo between black and white men. For black men reconciliation means in the first place "an acceptance of our blackness."²² "If the death-resurrection of Christ means anything, it means that the blackness of black people is a creation of God himself. God came into the world in order that black people need not be ashamed of who they are. In Christ we not only know who we are, but who God

¹⁷ p. 147.

¹⁸ p. 148.

¹⁹ p. 148.

²⁰ p. 148.

²¹ p. 149.

²² p. 149.

is. This is the heart of the biblical message."²³ This is what Barth meant when he spoke of "the covenant as the presupposition of reconciliation."²⁴

"Therefore, when black people say Yes to their humanity by affirming their blackness, we must conclude that the affirmation was made possible through God's reconciling act in Jesus Christ."²⁵

What then does reconciliation mean in relation to other men and, in particular to white men? "When the other men are white people, this means that black people will bring their new restored image of themselves to every encounter.... They will not let Whiteness make an idol of them, but will insist, with every ounce of strength, that they are people. For white people, God's reconciliation in Jesus Christ means that God has made black people a beautiful people; and if they are going to be in relationship with God, they must enter by way of their black brothers, who are a manifestation of God's presence on earth. The assumption that one can know God without knowing blackness is the basic heresy of the white churches. They want God without blackness, Christ without obedience, love without death. What they fail to realize is that in America, God's revelation on earth has always been black, red or some other shade, but never white. Whiteness, as revealed in the history of America, is the expression of what is wrong with man. It is a symbol of man's depravity."²⁶ "When we can see a people who are being controlled by an ideology of whiteness, then we know what reconciliation must mean. The coming of Christ means a denial of what we thought we were. It means destroying the white devil in us. Reconciliation to God means that white people are prepared to deny themselves (whiteness), take up the cross (blackness) and follow Christ (black ghetto)."²⁷ "In a white racist society, Christian obedience can only mean being obedient to blackness, its glorification and exaltation."²⁸

"Therefore, God's Word of reconciliation means that we can only be justified by becoming black. Reconciliation makes us all black. Through this, radical change, we become identified totally with the suffering of black masses. It is this

²³ p. 149.

²⁴ p. 149.

²⁵ p. 149.

²⁶ p. 150.

²⁷ p. 150.

²⁸ p. 151.

fact that makes white churches anti-Christian in their essence. To be Christian is to be one of those whom God has chosen. God has chosen black people.”²⁹

What shall I say in conclusion? I have given Dr. Cone’s argument fully in his own words. No one need misunderstand him. I think I can best give my reaction to his clear-cut message to me by way of writing him the following brief letter.

Dear Dr. Cone:

Only recently has your book on *Black Theology and Black Power* come to my attention. The argument of your book is cogent and internally consistent. If the philosophers and theologians you have appealed to for support of your position are right in what they say about God, about man and about Christ then your conclusion follows. But then it is also true that all human speech between you and me is meaningless. On the view of modern existentialist philosophy and theology the human self cannot identify itself as a self in distinction from other selves.

Accordingly you cannot reach me where I am with your challenge. If you were to add the keenest analysis of modern depth-psychology to the analysis of the keenest existentialist philosopher you would not be any closer to reaching me.

I could wish that I, as a white man, am only as bad as you say I am. But I am much worse. My wickedness, and therefore my guilt in relation to your people springs from the total corruption of my heart. I hate God and, therefore, I also hate my fellow-man. Of myself I hate every black man, yes, I hate every man of every race. I am dead in trespasses and sins. I am as dead spiritually, as Lazarus whom Jesus raised, was physically. I cannot do one good deed. My goal of my actions is myself, my standard of action is myself and the motivation of my action is faith in myself. Oh, wretched man that I am who shall deliver me from this death? Will you pray for me that I may, by the quickening and enlightening power of the Holy Spirit, learn to know how great my sins and miseries are?

I know the wrath of God rests upon me. I am a fugitive from justice. I am on the staircase that leads downward to eternal separation from my creator-redeemer God, for my sin against God and my fellow-man, including in a special sense my sin against your people. Will you pray for me? My sin is far greater and far more heinous than I can ever know. I know that, like David, I am an adulterer and a murderer. I know I deserve eternal isolation from my creator-redeemer God

²⁹ p. 151.

and from my fellow men. But only Christ, who died in my place for my sin knows how great my sins are. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (Ps 51:10).

But how could I pray this kind of prayer and how could I expect you to pray this kind of prayer for me, Mr. Cone, unless both of us had already looked into the face of him who died for us on the accursed tree? "He who knew no sin was made sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor 5:21). And how could I pray and how could I expect you to pray this sort of prayer for me unless by the Holy Spirit of God we are born from above, born of God. Jesus tells us as he told Nicodemus, "Truly I assure you, unless a person is born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God." Jn 3:3 NBV

How I wish, with all my heart, Mr. Cone, that you would kneel next to me and be able to use the words of Paul with me, "God made Him who knew no sin to be made sin on our behalf, so that in Him we might share the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21).

Then and then only could we get under way toward solving the problem of the relation of your people and mine. Then and then only could we really learn to treat one another as persons and not as things. Then indeed there would be a church as a covenant there would be true person to person communion around the table of our Lord.

When we thus pray together and for one another then our problem is solved. Christ said: "It is finished." Those that are washed through his blood now love God, the triune Creator-Redeemer-Sanctifier above all else and their neighbor, of every race, as themselves. The Holy Spirit has taken the "things of Christ" and given them to many of your people and to many of my people. None of your people and none of my people have lived out fully in practice the life of faith and of peace which the Holy Spirit has planted in their hearts. But it is there and unless it were, there would be no hope for the solution of the race problem or for the solution of any other problem.

I realize full well that you have no such sense of sin and of the forgiveness of sin as I have. I realize that your Christ did not die as your substitute to bear for you the wrath of God. Your Christ did not say, "It is finished," in your behalf.

You have ignored the entire framework of thinking in which there is a "transition from wrath to grace" in history. You have in effect not merely ignored but rejected the theology of Reformation theology. You have committed yourself

to the Kantianized misinterpretation of Reformation theology. You are in "good company," the company of the great neo-orthodox theologians in doing so. For all that you are in the company of those who with such men as Sartre think of man as emerging from Chance by some freak accident, calling himself a self and then swinging the logician's postulate saying that the historic Reformation scheme of things cannot be true. You are in "good" company when the chance-produced intellect of man, must, to save itself from facing the judgment which, deep down in his heart, he knows is coming, make a universal, *a priori* negative judgment about a purely contingent future.

It would make no sense for you to pray in terms of such a framework of thought. You would pray to an unknown and unknowable "God," a God who is not a person and has not created human beings as persons. In other words the "covenant-community" to which you say modern theology from Barth to Moltmann holds, has no persons who could make covenant with one another. How will such a covenant-community, assuming that it would include men of all races alike, do anything that would work toward justice and righteousness between them.

So, I plead with you, Mr. Cone, that you will forsake the modern, post-Kantian framework of thought in terms of which you have drawn a picture of a Christ-Event which is merely a product of apostate man's imagination drawn in the interest of preventing the challenge of the Christ of the Scriptures from coming to you.

The Greeks thought of man as participant in deity. Paul told them that to think thus was to insult the God who had actually created them and whose image they bore. The Greeks thought that the "evil" within and about them was the manifestation of an eternally existing principle of pure-contingency. Paul said they deceived themselves into thinking they were not responsible for evil whereas in fact for their disobedience in Adam it was they who had brought it into the world.

The Greeks thought the future meant the everlasting continuance of man's hopelessness in the face of a formless reality. Paul preached Christ and the resurrection with joy and peace in this life and in the next.

The modern situation is to all intents the same as that of Paul's day. Modern thought is in basic agreement with Greek thought in its view of reality. Accordingly, modern thought faces the same utter meaninglessness that faced Greek thought.

Will you, Mr. Cone, now advise your people to follow the Greek and modern opposition to the gospel Paul brought to the Greeks and, through us, brings to men today? How can you truly love your people unless you love them in terms of the Christ of the Scriptures instead of in terms of the Christ-projection of modern would-be self-sufficient man.

As the Lord God omniscient knows my heart I love your people. They are to me a "beautiful people." "God has chosen black people." I pray for their salvation for the life to come. I pray for the radical removal of all social injustices done to them by my people. I work for that for which I pray. I am far, very far, from what I ought to be in these matters but, by the grace of God, I try and urge others to try. I would remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 25 to the effect that if we have not clothed the naked and visit those in prison we have denied him and he will cast me into outer darkness where "there will be weeping and grinding of teeth." That is, I remember both the wrath and the promise of my covenant God as I think of your people and of my people. I wish and pray that by the power of the Spirit you will do the same as you think of both your people and my people too. Unless both of us do, there is no hope for either your people or for my people.

P.S. When I wrote my letter to you on *Black Theology and Black Power*, I did not know that Dr. Cone has written a second book with the title *Liberation*. Allow me to make a few remarks about it. First, Cone's theme is the same in both books, i.e. Freedom or Liberation. Secondly, Cone's approach is the same in both books. He is out to prove that any theology that calls itself Christian theology in America today should call itself black theology. "The appearance of Jesus as the Black Christ also means that the Black Revolution is God's kingdom becoming a reality in America."¹ Thirdly, Cone appeals to essentially the same philosophers and theologians in both books. He gets his support from existential philosophers and neo-orthodox theologians in both books.

Keeping these three facts in mind I can now be brief in what I have to say on *Liberation*. I shall, in general, again follow Cone's argument.

Chapter 1: The Content of Theology

Chapter one deals with the content of theology. "Christian theology is a theology of liberation. It is a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of

¹ *Liberation*, p. 220.

liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ. This means that its sole reason for existence is to put into ordered speech the meaning of God's activity in the world, so that the community of the oppressed will recognize that their inner thrust for liberation is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ."²

"Entering the kingdom of God means that Jesus himself becomes man's ultimate loyalty, for he is the Kingdom."³

"The Christ-event in twentieth-century America is a black-event, that is an event of liberation taking place in the black community in which black people recognize that it is incumbent upon them to throw off the chains of white oppression by whatever means they regard as suitable."⁴

But blackness is not a matter of skin-color. It is an "ontological symbol and a visible reality which best describes what oppression means in America."⁵ A true theology is a black theology, i.e. a theology written with reference to the oppressed in the land. Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer know this. "Even Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* moves in the direction of blackness."⁶

"The task of Black Theology is to take Christian tradition that is so white and make it black by showing that the white man does not know really what he is saying when he affirms Jesus as the Christ. He who has come to redeem us is not white but black; and the redemption of which he speaks has nothing to do with stabilizing the *status quo*."⁷ "The search for black identity is the search for God, for God's identity is black identity."⁸ "We are seeking meaning in a world permeated with philosophical and theological absurdities, where hope is nonexistent. In existential philosophy the absurd is 'that which is meaningless.' "⁹

Chapter 2: The Sources And Norm Of Black Theology

² p. 17.

³ p. 20.

⁴ p. 24.

⁵ p. 27.

⁶ p. 28.

⁷ p. 29.

⁸ p. 40.

⁹ p. 43.

So much for an introductory statement of the content of black theology. We reserve comment till later.

We now follow Cone as he speaks about the sources and norm of Black Theology. "The sources are the 'formative factors' that determine the character of a given theology, and the norm is 'the criterion to which the sources ... must be subjected.' That is, the sources are the relevant data for the theological task, while the norm determines how the data will be used."¹⁰

A. Sources of Black Theology

What are the sources of Black Theology?

1. Black Experience (p. 54)
2. Black History (p. 57)
3. Black Culture (p. 60)
4. Revelation (p. 63)
5. Scripture (p. 66)

Tillich and Barth can help us explain what these points mean. Tillich on Culture and Barth on Revelation. Of course, Black Theology must make its own specifications and adjustments. The important point is that, like these men we identify God with his act of revelation in Jesus Christ, and that we identify Jesus Christ with his work of saving the black community. "For Black Theology, revelation is not just a past event or a contemporary event in which it is difficult to recognize the activity of God. Revelation is a black event, i.e. what black people are doing about their liberation. I have spoken of the black experience, black history, and black culture as theological sources because they are God himself at work liberating his people."¹¹ To identify God with "what black people are doing about their liberation" is dangerous. People might interpret us pantheistically. "But this risk must be taken if theological statements are going to have meaning

¹⁰ p. 50–51.

¹¹ p. 65.

in a world that is falling apart because white people think that God has appointed them to rule over other people, especially black people.”¹²

“Black Theology takes the risk of faith and thus makes an unqualified identification of God’s revelation with the liberation of black people. There can be no other medium of encountering the contemporary revelatory event of God in this society.”¹³

Cone is willing to risk the danger of pantheism but he is unwilling to face the risk of orthodoxy. The orthodox way of talking about God and man, about Christ and his work of saving man would make altogether impossible the identification of God and Christ with “what black men are doing for their liberation.” The orthodox approach comes to its climactic expression in its static view of Scripture. This must be rejected. “The meaning of Scripture is not to be found in the words of Scripture as such but only in its power to point beyond itself to the reality of God’s revelation; and in America, that means black liberation. Herein lies the key to the meaning of biblical inspiration. The Bible is inspired because through reading it a community can encounter the resurrected Christ and thus be placed in a state of freedom whereby it will be willing to risk all for earthly freedom.”¹⁴

B. The Norm of Black Theology

“The theological norm is the hermeneutical principle which is decisive in specifying how sources are to be used by rating their importance and by distinguishing the relevant data from the irrelevant.”¹⁵ That is to say Cone takes the black consciousness and its self-determined needs to be the norm of God’s revelation through Christ in Scripture. This is to follow Schleiermacher, the father of modern theology, and Barth, the father of neo-orthodoxy.

A theologian brings to the Bible the perspective of a community, in the present case the black community and “what is to be hoped is that that community’s concern is consistent with the concern of the community that gave us the Scriptures. It is the task of theology to keep these two communities

¹² p. 65.

¹³ p. 66.

¹⁴ p. 69.

¹⁵ p. 75.

(biblical and contemporary) in constant tension, in order that we may be able to speak meaningfully about God in the contemporary situation.”¹⁶

“Black people have heard enough about God. What they want to know is what God has to say about the black condition. Or, more importantly, what he is doing about it.”¹⁷

Cone finds support for this correlation between God and the black community from Tillich’s method of correlation. “The norm of all God-talk which seeks to be black-talk is the manifestation of Jesus as the Black Christ who provides the necessary soul for black liberation. This is the hermeneutical principle for Black Theology which guides its interpretation of the meaning of contemporary Christianity. Black Theology refuses to accept any norm which does not focus on Jesus Christ, because he is the essence of the Christian gospel.”¹

Chapter 3: The Meaning of Revelation

From this point on Cone applies his principle of hermeneutic. In chapter three he does this with respect to the idea of revelation. In this chapter Cone gives us his “epistemological justification” for his claim that God is “what black people are doing for their liberation.” With Tillich, he says that “every epistemological assertion is implicitly ontological.”² “Nevertheless, it is necessary to make rational sense out of the community’s ontological assertions, so that they themselves will understand more clearly the meaning of their commitment to the ultimate. Therefore, if the theologian is going to make intelligible the community’s view of God and man, it is necessary to begin with a rational analysis of revelation so that the presuppositional character of Christian theology will be clear from the outset.”³ To procure for ourselves such a “rational sense” of revelation requires us again to reject all orthodox views. We must follow Barth in his “radical reinterpretation of revelation.”⁴ If we follow Barth and modern theology in general then we at last have an “inherently biblical” view of revelation.⁵ Surely, for all their claim to being “biblical” in their theology, orthodoxy is anything but

¹⁶ p. 76.

¹⁷ p. 77.

¹ p. 80.

² p. 85.

³ p. 86.

⁴ p. 86.

⁵ p. 92.

that. We can see this fact clearly now that we work on the presupposition of the self-sufficiency of the human consciousness, in particular the black consciousness.

“By making revelation a historical happening, the Bible makes faith something other than an ecstatic feeling in moments of silent prayer, or an acceptance of inerrant propositions. Faith is the community’s response to God’s act of liberation. It is saying Yes to God and No to oppressors. Faith is the existential element in revelation, i.e., the community’s perception of their being and the willingness to fight against nonbeing.”⁶ The old idea of general revelation must also be reinterpreted. “All human acts against alien powers of enslavement are acts of God. We do not need to read the Bible to know that human enslavement is ungodly, and the slaves will do everything possible to break the chains.”⁷

In particular, our new activist view of knowledge (epistemology) and our new activist view of reality (ontology), involved in one another as they are, give us a new view, a truly biblical view of sins. “Sin is a concept which is only meaningful within the context of a Christian community. It is the community’s recognition that they have lost their identity for being. Since whites and blacks do not share a common identity, white people cannot possibly know what sin is from a black perspective.”⁸

All men are sinners. Even black men are sinners. “According to Black Theology the sin of the oppressed is not that they are responsible for their own enslavement—far from it. Their sin is that of trying to ‘understand’ the enslaver, to ‘love’ him on his own terms. As the oppressed community recognize their situation in the light of God’s revelation, they know now that they should have killed him instead of ‘loving’ him.”⁹ In all this we may, says Cone, follow Bultmann’s principle of hermeneutics. But we must go beyond Bultmann. “It is not enough to say that God’s revelation is a Christ-event; it is a black-event, i.e., black people expressing their being in spite of 350 years of white oppression. This is the reality that shapes the black perspective. To know God is to know about ourselves, our beautiful black selves. This is what revelation means to black people. It is a contemporary decision about a contemporary event, the event of black and white beings.”¹⁰

⁶ p. 95.

⁷ p. 99.

⁸ p. 100.

⁹ p. 100–101.

¹⁰ p. 105.

Chapter 4: God in Black Theology

Applying our hermeneutical principle to the doctrine of God we must again go beyond both Barth and Tillich. "The point of departure of Black Theology is the biblical God as he is related to the black liberation struggle."¹

"The blackness of God, and everything implied by it in a racist society, is the heart of Black Theology's doctrine of God."² "The blackness of God means that God has made the oppressed condition his own condition. This is the essence of the biblical revelation."³

"Using blackness as the point of departure, Black Theology believes the love of God to man is revealed in his willingness to become black. His love is incomprehensible apart from blackness."⁴

Chapter 5: Man in Black Theology

Cone's doctrine of man is, naturally, similar to that of his doctrine of God. In our view of man we start again from "the black condition as the fundamental datum of human experience."⁵ This does not mean that we must deny the existence of God. There is no need for that. But with Camus and Sartre we hold "that the God problem must never be permitted to detract from the concern for real man."⁶

What then is man? "Man is a Free Being."⁷ Having said this, Cone goes on to reinterpret the orthodox doctrine of man's freedom as the image-bearer of God in terms of the theology of Barth, the theology of Bonhoeffer,⁸ the theology of Jürgen Moltmann⁹, and the philosophy of Sartre.¹⁰ Rightly applied this means, says Cone that, "Being free in America means accepting blackness as the only

¹ p. 115.

² p. 120.

³ p. 121.

⁴ p. 137.

⁵ p. 154.

⁶ p. 155.

⁷ p. 159.

⁸ p. 168.

⁹ p. 169.

¹⁰ p. 172.

possible way of existing in the world.”¹¹ Only if we accept blackness in this way are we free from sin. “To be in sin means to deny the community.”¹² We start by affirming the community.

Chapter 6: Christ in Black Theology

All that we say with respect to God, being that which the black man is doing for his liberation, has its focus in Jesus Christ. “Christian theology begins and ends with Jesus Christ.”¹³ In saying this Black Theology is inherently biblical.

In justification for this Cone appeals to “the theologians of the new quest.” He refers to James Robinson’s book, *The New Quest of the Historical Jesus*. These theologians think that such men as Barth and Bultmann have not done full justice to the historical Jesus. We must have a Jesus who lived in the past. There is abundant evidence that “Jesus’ identification with the oppressed is the distinctive historical kernel in the gospels.”¹⁴ Thus God is in Jesus Christ identical with what black men are doing for their liberation. And this identification of God in Christ with the black man is identical with the kingdom of God.

It is thus that Cone identifies the idea of freedom of man as Sartre defines it with “Christian freedom.”¹⁵

This Christian freedom, this freedom of the kingdom of God as the kingdom of man, is based on the “resurrection” of Jesus.¹⁶ This shows, argues Cone, that we have a good objective basis for our idea of Christian freedom as identical with black power. Jesus “is who he was, and we know who he was through a critical, historical evaluation of the New Testament Jesus.”¹⁷

We may agree with Pannenberg, says Cone, but we must again relate the person of Jesus “to black persons, asking, ‘What is his relevance to the black community today?’ In this sense, unlike Pannenberg, we say that the theological value of Christ’s person must finally determine our Christology. It is the

¹¹ p. 183.

p. 187.

¹³ p. 197.

¹⁴ p. 203.

¹⁵ p. 211.

¹⁶ p. 212.

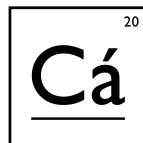
¹⁷ p. 212.

oppressed community in the situation of liberation that determines the meaning and scope of Jesus Christ.”¹

Chapter 7: Church, World and Eschatology In Black Theology

To all this, argues Cone, we must add that the “church is that community that has received the Holy Spirit and is now ready to do what is necessary to live out the gospel.”² Thus the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are, for Cone, identical with what the black community is doing for its liberation.

What Cone has done in this as well as in *Black Theology and Black Power* is to lead his people into a new and horrible slavery. He has sought “liberation” for his people where Sartre seeks it, i.e., in the declaration of independence from the only God and the only Christ who can set man free. He is in “good company” when he does this. He is in the company of neo-orthodox theologians and existentialist philosophers. But this does not, finally, reduce his responsibility. Cone is preaching liberation through the would-be independent man, who thrashes about in a bottomless, shoreless ocean of chance, in vain seeking to identify himself. We hope and pray that Cone might seek for liberation for himself and for his people where we all must seek it, in the once-for-all finished atonement through the blood of Christ. Mr. Cone, will you not with me, next to me, kneel at the foot of the cross and pray, Lord be merciful to me a sinner? May the Spirit of Christ enable you and me both do this.¹



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¹ p. 212–213.

² p. 230.

¹ Van Til, C., & Sigward, E. H. (1997). *The works of Cornelius Van Til, 1895-1987* (electronic ed.). New York: Labels Army Co.