BLACK THEOLOGY AND BLACK LIBERATION

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Black theology is relatively new to America. Though it has roots in the pre-Civil War black church which recognized that racism and Christianity were opposites, “black theology” is a phenomenon of the 1960s. One way of describing it is to say that it is the religious counterpart of the more secular movement called “black power.” This means that black theology is a religious application of black people’s need to define the scope and meaning of black existence in a white racist society. Black power focuses on the political, social and economic condition of black people, seeking to define concretely the meaning of black self-determination in a society that has placed definite limits on black humanity. Black theology puts black identity into a theological context, showing that black power is not only consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ: it is the gospel of Jesus Christ. My purpose is to investigate this thesis, analyzing black theology in relation to black history, black power, and the biblical message.

Black History

The black existential mood that expresses itself in black power and black theology stems from the recognition that black identity must be defined in terms of its African heritage rather than in terms of European enslavement. James Baldwin has put the case memorably:

I was a kind of bastard of the West; when I followed my past, I did not find myself in Europe but in Africa. And this meant that in some subtle way, in a really profound way, I brought to Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt, to the stones of Paris, to the Cathedral at Chartres and to the Empire state building, a special attitude. These were really not my cre-

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of black victims, a projection of our being into the unexplored depths of black consciousness—creating and affirming the notion of blackness in its undisputed African expression. In order to understand, we must be willing to move into uncharted dimensions of our being as defined by the need to create new value structures so that our understanding of blackness will not depend upon European misconceptions. It means realizing that our history did not begin with the fifteenth century European enslavement of Africans. Our origins lie further back—much further back—in known and "unknown" history. Known in the sense that we were there in Egypt's Nile valley, traditionally called the cradle of civilization. "Unknown" in the sense that the meaning of our personhood is not dependent on the records of ancient history. The present reality of our encounter with blackness defines who we are. The new black consciousness arises from the need of black people to defend themselves against those who seek to destroy them. We know who we are in terms of doing what is necessary to protect ourselves and our families from rats and thiefs, police and government officials. Our defense is at the same time a definition, a way of moving in the world, and it is programmed according to our need for liberation. The investigation of our past in the light of our liberation may be defined as black power taking on historical dimensions.

**Black Power**

Strictly speaking, black power appeared in the spring of 1966, when Stokely Carmichael verbalized the unwillingness of black people to live under white definitions of their humanity. It may be true that the actual content of the phrase was not clearly defined and the dynamics of its implications in black-white relations not clearly understood. Nevertheless this was the beginning of the will of black people to make public their utter distrust of white do-gooders and their displeasure with whites who try to tell them what their blackness ought to mean. Black power means that blacks are publicly declaring that whatever white people do, it will inevitably work against black freedom. Black people realize that they cannot change oppressors' attitudes by praying, singing gospel hymns and reading Scripture or preaching sermons. Neither can we change their attitude simply by peacefully disobeying laws and allowing the oppressors to beat our women and children with police clubs. It just isn’t true that if we try hard enough and wait patiently, eventually the oppressors will feel ashamed of their conduct and thus relinquish their power to enslave. Oppressors have no conscience except that of defending their own interests. We wait in vain for the Holy Spirit on this matter! Men in power will never admit that the society rewards them far in excess of the service they render. Appeals to reason, religion, philosophy or sociology will not change their perspective. These disciplines are their tools and will inevitably serve as rationalization of their own interest.

"There is, in fact, nothing in common between a master and a slave," writes Camus. "It is impossible to speak and communicate with a person who has been reduced to servitude." In part, this means that the presumption of power infantilizes the master to the humanity of the slave, making him behave as if his own humanity is dependent upon the enslavement of his brother. There is an "infinite qualitative distinction" (to use a Kierkegaardian-Sartrean phrase) between world views of master and slave; and if the slave intends to change his existence, his first task is to inform the master what the limits are. The slave must be willing to define himself in terms of the silence of the master, realizing that the latter's gibberish about life and happiness is a projection of his own ego, having nothing to do with authentic human existence. To silence the master is necessary because the oppressor will never conclude that he should not be the ruler. The slave must not deduce himself; freedom is not easy. "Freedom," as Camus's Jean-Baptiste puts it, "is not a reward or a decoration that is celebrated with champagne. Nor yet a gift, a box of dainties designed to make you lick your chops. Oh, no! It's a chore... and a long distance race!"

Black power is the recognition that black freedom becomes a reality only when the victims of white racism declare that the oppressors have overstepped the bounds of human relations and that it is now incumbent upon black people to do what is necessary to bring to a halt the white encroachments on black dignity. The willingness to behave on the basis of this conclusion is nothing but reducing phraseology to action. It means that blacks accept the risk of defining themselves. Like our forefathers who rebelled against slavery, we know that life is not worth living unless we are fighting against its limits. This is what black power means.

**Black Theology Defined**

How are black history and black power related to black theology? Black history is recovering a past deliberately destroyed by slavemasters, an attempt to revive old survival symbols and create new ones. Black power is an attempt to shape our present economic, social and political existence according to those actions that destroy the oppressor's hold on black flesh. Black theology places our past and present actions toward black liberation in theological context, seeking to destroy aliens gods; and to create value-structures according to the God of black freedom.

The significance of black theology then is found in the conviction that the content of the Christian gospel is liberation. This means that any talk about God that fails to take seriously the righteousness of God as revealed in the liberation of the weak and downtrodden is not Christian language. It may be "religious" or "churchly" and thus "patriotic," but it has nothing to do with him who has called us into being and who came to us in Jesus Christ and is present as Holy Spirit with us today. To speak of the God of Christianity is to speak of him who has defined himself according to the liberation of the oppressed. Christian theology, then, pursuing its church-function, is that discipline which analyzes the meaning of God's liberation in the light of Jesus Christ, showing that all actions that make for the freedom of man are indeed
the actions of God. Herein lies the heart of black theology's perspective on the theological task.

Two Sources

The definition of theology as an explication of the meaning of God's liberation of the oppressed arises essentially from two sources: biblical history and black liberation.

Biblical history. According to the Bible, the God of Israel is known by what he is doing in history for the salvation of man. It is this critical dimension of divine activity that makes history and salvation inseparable in biblical religion. To see the revelation of God is to see the action of God in the historical affairs of men. God is not uninvolved in human history, as in the Greek philosophical tradition; the opposite is the case. He is participating in human history, moving in the direction of man's salvation which is the goal of divine activity.

Of course, we must be cautious in our use of the word salvation. Salvation means many things for different communities. For white oppressors, it seems to have acquired a "spiritual" connotation that is often identified with divine juice, squirited into the souls of believers, thereby making them better Christians and citizens. Understandably, salvation for them has little to do with the economic, political and social dimensions of human existence unless, however, there are those who wish to challenge societal injustice. Then men are called upon to act out their salvation not only through silent prayer but by faithfully protecting the existing laws. An attack upon the state is tantamount to an affront to God, and all "good" Christians must show their faith by protecting the sanctity of the nation. This view of the salvation of God is not only anti-biblical; it is dangerous, for it identifies God with oppressors, giving political and religious approval to the oppression of man.

The biblical view of salvation has an entirely different meaning. "In the Old Testament salvation is expressed by a word which has the root meaning of 'to be wide' or 'spaceout,' 'to develop without hindrance' and thus ultimately 'to have victory in battle' (I Sam. 14:45)"—so F. J. Taylor declares. To be saved means that one's enemies have been conquered, and the savior is he who has the power to gain victory. As Taylor says, again:

He who needs salvation is one who has been threatened or oppressed, and his salvation consists in deliverance from danger and tyranny or rescue from imminent peril (I Sam. 4:3, 7:8, 9:16). To save another is to communicate to him one's own prevailing strength (Job 26:2), to give him the power to maintain necessary strength.1

In the Old Testament, Yahweh is the Savior par excellence because Israel's identity as a people is grounded in his liberating activity in the escape from Egypt. "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples" (Exod. 19:4–5a). Through his election of this people God reveals that his righteousness is for the poor and weak, and their salvation consists in his liberation of them from earthly bondage.

The same emphasis is found in the New Testament. Jesus is pictured as the oppressed one who views his own person and work as an identification with the humiliated condition of the poor. The poor were at the heart of his mission: "The last shall be first and the first last" (Matt. 20:16). That is why he was always kind to traitors, adulterers and sinners and why the Samaritan came out on top in the parable. Speaking of Pharisees (the religious oppressors of his day), he said: "Truly I say to you the tax collectors [traitors] and harlots go into the kingdom—but not you" (Matt. 21:31). Jesus had little tolerance for the middle- or upper-class religious snob whose attitude attempted to usurp the sovereignty of God and destroy the dignity of the poor. The kingdom is for the poor and not the rich because the former has nothing to expect from this world while the latter's entire existence is grounded in his commitment to worldly things. The weak and helpless may expect everything from God while the oppressor may expect nothing because of his own refusal to free himself from his pride. It is not that poverty is a precondition for salvation. But those who recognize the utter dependence on God and wait on his liberation despite the miserable absurdity of life are usually poor, according to our Lord.

Furthermore, it is not possible to be for Christ and also for the enslavement of men. For Christ, salvation is not an eschatological longing for escape to a transcendent reality; neither is it an inward scrutiny which eases unbearable suffering. Rather it is God in Christ encountering man in the depths of his existence in oppression, liberating him from all human evils (like racism) which hold him captive. The repentant man knows that though God's ultimate kingdom be in the future, yet Christ's resurrection means that even now God's salvation breaks through like a ray of "blackness" upon the "whiteness" of the condition of the oppressed, disclosing that oppressed man is not alone in the world. He who has called things into being is with the oppressed, and he guarantees that man's liberation will become a reality of the land—and "all flesh shall see it together." 2

Black liberation. "Theology, as a function of the Christian church, must serve the needs of the church. A theological system is supposed to satisfy two basic needs: The statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation." So says Paul Tillich. If the truth of the gospel is God's liberation that centers on the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the divine guarantee that he who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit has taken upon himself the oppressed condition of all people, then theology must ask: What is the significance of this message for our time? In what ways can we best explicate the meaning of God's liberating activity in the world so that the oppressed will be ready to risk all for earthly freedom? These questions are not easy, and they require willingness to discard long-standing oppressive val-
ues, facing the necessity to create new values as defined according to the reality of divine liberation.

Taking seriously the necessity to make the Christian message of liberation relevant to our time, we conclude that Christian theology in America must be black. In a society where men are defined on the basis of color for the purpose of humiliation, Christian theology takes on the color of the victims, proclaiming that the condition of the poor is incongruous with him who has come to liberate us. Soulful James Brown is right: Black is beautiful! It is beautiful because the white oppressors have made it ugly. Christians must glorify it because the oppressors despise it, must love it because the oppressors hate it. This is the new Christian way of saying, "To hell with your stinking white society and its middle-class ideas about the world. It has nothing to do with liberating deeds of God."

The Fallacy of Colorlessness

It is to be expected that white theologians, clinging to their own sense of worth as defined through identification with whiteness, will not endorse black theology enthusiastically. Some will ignore it while others will respond with the dictum: "Theology is colorless!" Such judgments are typical of those who have not experienced the concreteness of human suffering inflicted because of color, or who are very comfortable with a theology that is "colorless" only if "white" means absence of color.

To ignore black theology is the easy way out. It is analogous to whites" moving into suburbs because they cannot deal with the reality of the black ghetto in the city. More interesting, though not surprising, is the white insistence that theology does not come in colors. They who have made color the vehicle of dehumanization are now telling us that theology is raceless and "universal." This seems a bit late after nearly 400 years of silence on this issue. Why did we not hear this word when people were being enslaved in the name of God and democracy precisely on the basis of color? Where were these "colorless" theologians when people were being lynched because of the color of their skins? Everyone should know that whites and not blacks are responsible for the demarcation of community on the basis of color. We blacks are merely the victims. And to criticize the theology of the victims because it centers on the aspect that best defines the limits of their existence seems to miss the point entirely.

Of course, black theology cannot waste its time trying to demonstrate its legitimacy to oppressors. It is accountable only to its Lord as he makes himself known through the liberation of oppressed community. It says: If Jesus Christ is in fact the Liberator whose resurrection is the guarantee that he is present with us today, then he too must be black, taking upon his person and work the blackness of our existence, and revealing to us what is necessary in our destruction of whiteness. This means therefore that authentic theological speech arises only from the community of the oppressed who realize that their humanity is inseparable from their liberation from earthly bondage. All other speech is at best irrelevant and at worst blasphemy.

NOTES
2. Ibid.
7. Ibid.