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## PART I

# Black Theology as Liberation Theology

From the time of slavery, Black reflections on the Christian faith have emphasized the idea of liberation as the heart of the gospel of Jesus. In the five essays of this section, the theme of liberation is analyzed theologically with emphases on its contemporary manifestations in the struggle of African-Americans to achieve justice in the United States.

In the first essay, "Christian Theology and Scripture as the Expression of God's Liberating Activity for the Poor," I argue that the culture of the oppressed must be used as the primary source for explicating the meaning of the gospel for our time. As will be obvious to my Black critics, I am also responding to their criticism that my version of Black theology (especially in *Black Theology and Black Power* (Seabury, 1969; Orbis Books, 1989) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Lippincott, 1970; Orbis Books, 1986) is not really Black, because I have not used Black history and culture as the primary source to define it. Black critics claimed that my theology was defined by white concepts and not the Black experience. Like *The Spirituals and the Blues* (Seabury, 1972; Orbis Books, 1991) and *God of the Oppressed* (Seabury, 1975, Orbis Books, 1997), this essay serves as a corrective to a weakness of my initial perspective on Black theology.

The debate about the sources of Black theology is closely related to the discussion about the relationship between spiritual and political liberation. If the sources of Black theology must be derived from oppressed African-Americans, then the central meaning of Black liberation cannot be reduced to the historical deliverance of slaves from bondage. It must be more than that. The "more," as I attempt to describe it in "Sanctification and Liberation in the Black Religious Tradition," is Black people's ability to live in history without being determined by its limitations. No event expresses this transcendent truth more clearly than Sunday worship in the Black church.

As there is a danger in overemphasizing politics in Black theology, so there is a danger in placing too much stress on spirituality. Black spirituality can be misused and distorted. "Christian Faith and Political Praxis" represents my attempt to articulate an appropriate balance between faith and politics, between the worship of God in church and the liberation of persons from injustice in society. Unless Christians work out the proper balance between faith and social practice, they will inevitably fall victim to Marx's challenging critique of religion as the opium of the people.

Recently, a significant minority in the American Catholic Church has made a creative balance between faith and politics. In opposition to the Catholic ecclesiastical and American political establishments, they have expressed their solidarity with the struggles for justice among the poor in Latin America. But like many white Protestants, Catholics have not been sufficiently self-critical of their theological claims about freedom and justice, especially in relation to African-Americans. "A Theological Challenge to the American Catholic Church" was written at the request of the organizers of the conference on "Voices for Justice," held at the College of Notre Dame (Baltimore, July 1983). I hesitated when asked to give a critical evaluation of the American Catholic Church's view of justice as

seen from the perspective of a Black Protestant liberation theologian. I was acutely aware of my lack of personal knowledge regarding the theology and practice of the Catholic Church, and I expressed this concern to Black and white Catholics. But both groups insisted that I speak frankly about the gospel and justice when viewed in the light of the Catholic Church's treatment of its Black members.

Nothing has challenged the role of the Christian faith in the struggle of the poor for liberation more than the problem of violence. If God is the liberator of the oppressed from unjust suffering, does that mean that violence is an acceptable means for achieving justice? The relationship between the Christian faith and violence is a much-debated issue in the history of Christian theology. The last essay in Part I, "Violence and Vengeance: A Perspective," was presented as a "discussion starter" at a conference and not intended as an academic analysis of the theme. I merely wanted to stress the complexity of the theme and the need for Christians to express their solidarity with the victims of violence.

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## Christian Theology and Scripture as the Expression of God's Liberating Activity for the Poor

Theology is language about God. *Christian* theology is language about God's liberating activity in the world on behalf of the freedom of the oppressed. Any talk about God that fails to make God's liberation of the oppressed its starting point is not Christian. It may be philosophical and have some relation to Scripture, but it is not Christian. For the word "Christian" connects theology inseparably to God's will to set the captives free.

I realize that this understanding of theology and Christianity is not the central view of the Western theological tradition and neither is it the dominant viewpoint of contemporary Euro-American theology. However, truth ought not to be defined by the majority or by the dominant intellectual interest of university academicians. The purpose of this essay is to examine the theological presuppositions that underlie the claim that Christian theology is language about God's liberation of the victim from social and political oppression.

\*This essay originally was presented at the annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Black Religion (1975) and later appeared as "What Is Christian Theology?" in *Encounter* 43 (Spring 1982): 117-28.

**I**

My contention that Christian theology is language about God's liberating activity for the poor is based upon the assumption that Scripture is the primary source of theological speech. To use Scripture as the starting point of theology does not rule out other sources, such as philosophy, tradition, and our contemporary context. It simply means that Scripture will define how these sources will function in theology.

That Christian theology must begin with Scripture appears self-evident. Without this basic witness Christianity would be meaningless. This point seems so obvious to me that it is almost impossible to think otherwise. However, the point does need clarification. There are many perspectives on Scripture. There are some who regard it as infallible, and there are others who say that it is simply an important body of literature. There are nearly as many perspectives on Scripture as there are theologians. While I cannot assess the validity of the major viewpoints, I can state what I believe to be the central message of Scripture.

I believe that my perspective on Scripture is derived from Scripture itself. Since others, with different perspectives, would say the same thing, I can only explain the essential structure of my hermeneutical perspective. It seems clear to me that whatever else we may say about Scripture, it is first and foremost a story of Israelite people who believed that Yahweh was involved in their history. In the Old Testament, the story begins with the first Exodus of Hebrew slaves from Egypt and continues through the second Exodus from Babylon and the rebuilding of the Temple. To be sure, there are many ways to look at this story, but the import of the biblical message is clear on this point: God's salvation is revealed in the liberation of slaves from socio-political bondage. Indeed, God's judgment is inflicted on the people of Israel when they humiliate the poor

and the orphans. "You shall not ill-treat any widow or fatherless child. If you do, be sure that I will listen if they appeal to me; my anger will be roused and I will kill you with the sword" (Exodus 22:23-24, NEB). Of course, there are other themes in the Old Testament, and they are important. But their importance is found in their illumination of the central theme of divine liberation. To fail to see this point is to misunderstand the Old Testament and thus to distort its message.

My contention that Scripture is the story of God's liberation of the poor also applies to the New Testament, where the story is carried to universal dimensions. The New Testament does not invalidate the Old. The meaning of Jesus Christ is found in God's will to make liberation not simply the property of one people but of all humankind. God became a poor Jew in Jesus and thus identified with the helpless in Israel. The cross of Jesus is nothing but God's will to be with and like the poor. The resurrection means that God achieved victory over oppression, so that the poor no longer have to be determined by their poverty. This is true not only for the "house of Israel" but for all the wretched of the land. The Incarnation, then, is simply God taking upon the divine self human suffering and humiliation. The resurrection is the divine victory over suffering, the bestowal of freedom to all who are weak and helpless. This and nothing else is the central meaning of the biblical story.

If theology is derived from this divine story, then it *must* be a language about liberation. Anything else would be an ideological distortion of the gospel message.

## II

Because Christian theology begins and ends with the biblical story of God's liberation of the weak, it is also christological language. On this point Karl Barth was right. Unfortunately

Barth did not explicate this christological point with sufficient clarity, because his theology was determined too much by the theological tradition of Augustine and Calvin and too little by Scripture. While Barth's christological starting point enabled him to move closer to the biblical message than most of his contemporaries, his understanding of theology was not derived from the biblical view of Jesus Christ as the Liberator of the oppressed. Because Jesus the Liberator is not central in Barth's christology, his view of theology is also defective at this point.

Because theology begins with Scripture, it must also begin with Christ. Christian theology is language about the crucified and risen Christ who grants freedom to all who are falsely condemned in an oppressive society. What else can the crucifixion mean except that God, the Holy One of Israel, became identified with the victims of oppression? What else can the resurrection mean except that God's victory in Christ is the poor person's victory over poverty? If theology does not take this seriously, how can it be worthy of the name Christian? If the church, the community out of which theology arises, does not make God's liberation of the oppressed central in its mission and proclamation, how can it rest easy with a condemned criminal as the dominant symbol of its message?

### III

Because Christian theology is more than the retelling of the biblical story, it also must do more than exegete Scripture. The meaning of Scripture is not self-evident in every situation. Therefore, it is theology's task to relate the message of the Bible to every situation. This is not an easy task, since situations are different, and God's word to humanity is not always self-evident.

Because theology must relate the message to the situation of the church's involvement in the world, theology must use

other sources in addition to Scripture. On this point, Bultmann and Tillich are more useful than Barth, although they misrepresent the function of culture in theology. Unlike Barth, my disagreement with Bultmann and Tillich is not on whether theology should use culture (e.g., philosophy, sociology, and psychology) in the interpretation of the gospel. That our language about God is inseparably bound with our own historicity seems so obvious that to deny it is to become enslaved to our own ideology. Karl Barth notwithstanding, the natural theology issue is dead, at least to the extent that our language is never simply about God and nothing else however much we might wish it otherwise. This means that theology cannot avoid philosophy, sociology, and other perspectives on the world.

The issue, then, is not whether we can or ought to avoid speaking of human culture in the doing of theology. Rather the question is whether divine revelation in Scripture grants us a possibility of saying something about *God* that is *not* simply about ourselves. Unless this possibility is given, however small it might be, then there seems to be no point in talking about the distinction between white and Black theology or the difference between falsehood and truth.

I believe that by focusing on Scripture, theology is granted the freedom to take seriously its social and political situation without being determined by it. Thus the question is not whether we take seriously our social existence but *how* and in *what* way we take it seriously. Whose social situation does our theology represent? For whom do we speak? The importance of Scripture in our theology is that it can help us to answer that question so as to represent the political interest of the One about whom Christianity speaks. By using Scripture, we are forced by Scripture itself to focus on our social existence, but not merely in terms of our own interests, though they are always involved. Scripture can liberate theology to be Chris-



tian in the contemporary situation. It can break the theologians out of their social ideologies and enable them to hear a word that is other than their own consciousness.

This "other" in theology is distinct but never separated from our social existence. God became human in Christ so that we are free to speak about God in terms of humanity. Indeed, any other talk is not about the crucified and risen Lord. The presence of the crucified and risen Christ as witnessed in Scripture determines whose social interest we must represent if we are to be faithful to him.

In an attempt to do theology in the light of this scriptural witness to the crucified and risen Christ as he is found in our contemporary situation, I have spoken of Christian theology as Black theology. Of course there are other ways of talking about God which are also Christian. I have never denied that, and do not wish to deny it today. Christian theology can be written from the perspective of red, brown, and yellow peoples. It can also be written in the light of women's experience. In Japan, I have been impressed by the way that Korean Christians are hearing the word of divine liberation in an impressive Japanese culture. Christian theology can also be written from the perspective of class, as has been profoundly disclosed in the writings of Latin American liberation theologians. It is also possible to combine the issues of class, sex, and color, as was demonstrated in Letty Russell's *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective*. The possibilities are many and varied. There is not one Christian theology, but many Christian theologies which are valid expressions of the gospel of Jesus.

But it is not possible to do Christian theology apart from the biblical claim that God came in Christ to set the captives free. It is not possible to do Christian theology as if the poor do not exist. Indeed, there can be no Christian speech about God which does not represent the interest of the victims in our society. If we can just make that point an embodiment of our

Christian identity, then we will have moved a long way since the days of Constantine.

#### IV

Because Christian theology is language about God's liberation of the weak as defined by Scripture in relation to our contemporary situation, Christian theology is inseparably connected with an oppressed community. If God is the God of the poor who is liberating them from bondage, how can we speak correctly about this God unless our language arises out of the community where God's presence is found? If Christian theology is language about the crucified and risen One, the One who has elected all for freedom, what else can it be than the language of those who are fighting for freedom?

My limitation of Christian theology to the oppressed community does not mean that everything the oppressed say about God is right because they are weak and helpless. To do that would be to equate the word of the oppressed with God's word. There is nothing in Scripture which grants this possibility. When the oppressed are inclined to use their position as a privilege, as an immunity from error, they do well to remember the scriptural witness to God's righteousness as other than anything human. On this point, Karl Barth was right: there is an infinite qualitative distinction between God and humanity.

When I limit Christian theology to the oppressed community, I intend to say nothing other than what I believe to be the central message of Scripture: God has chosen to disclose divine righteousness in the liberation of the poor. Therefore to be outside this community is to be in a place where one is excluded from the possibility of hearing and obeying God's word of liberation. By becoming poor and entrusting divine revelation to a carpenter from Nazareth, God makes clear where one has to be in order to hear the divine word and experience divine presence. If Jesus had been born in the king's

court and had been an advisor to the emperor of Rome, then what I am saying would have no validity. If Jesus had made no distinction between the rich and the poor, the weak and the strong, then the Christian gospel would not be a word of liberation to the oppressed. If Jesus had not been crucified as a criminal of Rome and condemned as a blasphemer by the Jewish religious leaders, then my claim about Christian theology and the oppressed would be meaningless. It is because Scripture is so decisively clear on this issue that I insist that theology cannot separate itself from the cultural history of the oppressed if it intends to be faithful to the One who makes Christian language possible.

What then are we to say about these other so-called Christian theologies? To the extent that they fail to remain faithful to the central message of the gospel, they are heretical. In saying this, I do not intend to suggest that I have the whole truth and nothing but the truth. In fact I could be the heretic. Furthermore, I do not believe that the purpose of identifying heresy is to be able to distinguish the “good” people from the “bad” or infallible truth from error. I merely intend to say what I believe to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus as witnessed in Scripture—nothing more and nothing less. If we do not say what we believe, in love and faith and the hope that we are speaking and doing the truth, then why speak at all? If there is no distinction between truth and error, the gospel and heresy, then there is no way to say what Christian theology is. We must be able to say when language is not Christian—if not always, then at least sometimes.

I say that white North American theology is heresy not because I want to burn anybody at the stake. Far too many of my people have been lynched for me to suggest such nonsense. The identification of heresy is not for the purpose of making ultimate decisions about who shall live or die and who will be saved or damned. To know what heresy is, is to know

what appears to be truth but is actually untruth. Thus it is for the sake of the truth of the gospel that we must say what truth is not.

The saying of what truth is, is intimately connected with the doing of truth. To know the truth is to do the truth. Speaking and doing are bound together so that what we say can be authenticated only by what we do. Unfortunately, the Western church has not always been clear on this point. Its mistake has often been the identification of heresy with word rather than action. By failing to explicate the connection between word and action, the church tended to identify the gospel with right speech and thus became the chief heretic. The church became so preoccupied with its own spoken word about God that it failed to hear and thus live according to God's word of freedom for the poor. From Augustine to Schleiermacher, it is hard to find a theologian in the Western church who defines the gospel in terms of God's liberation of the oppressed.

The same is true in much of the contemporary speech about God. It can be seen in the separation of theology from ethics and the absence of liberation in both. The chief mistake of contemporary white theology is not simply found in what it says about God, though that is not excluded. It is found in its separation of theory from praxis, and the absence of liberation in its analysis of the gospel.

## V

The limitation of Christian theology to the oppressed community not only helps us to identify heresy, it also helps us to reexamine the sources of theological speech. The language of liberation must reflect the experiences of the people about whom we claim to speak. To say that one's speech is a theology of liberation does not in itself mean that it represents the oppressed. There are many theologies of liberation, not all of which represent the weak and the helpless. The difference

between liberation theology in general and liberation theology in the Christian perspective is found in whether the language about freedom is derived from one's participation in the oppressed people's struggle. If one's language about freedom is derived from one's involvement in an oppressed people's struggle for freedom, then it is Christian language. It is a language that is accountable to the God encountered in the oppressed community, and not some abstract God in a theological textbook. To say that one's theology represents the poor means that the representation reflects the words and deeds of the poor. The theologian begins to talk like the poor, to pray like the poor, and to preach with the poor in mind. Instead of making Barth, Tillich, and Pannenberg the exclusive sources for the doing of theology, the true liberation theologian is compelled to hear the cries and the moans of the people who sing "I wish I knew how it would feel to be free, I wish I could break all the chains holdin' me."

What would theology look like if we were to take seriously the claim that Christian theology is poor people's speech about their hopes and dreams that one day "trouble will be no more"? One thing is certain: it would not look like most of the papers presented in the American Academy of Religion and the American Theological Society. Neither would it look like "process theology," "liberal theology," "Death of God theology," or a host of other adjectives academicians use to describe their intellectual endeavors.

Theology derived from the moans and shouts of oppressed Black people defines a different set of problems than those found in the white theological textbooks. Instead of asking whether the Bible is infallible, Black people want to know whether it is real—that is, whether the God to which it bears witness is present in their struggle. Black theology seeks to investigate the meaning of Black people's confidence in the biblical claim that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.

Black theology is the consciousness of the people analyzing the meaning of their faith when they have to live in an extreme situation of suffering. How can Black theology remain faithful to the people and the God revealed in their struggle if it does not respect the people's conceptualizations of their claim that "God will make a way of no way"? They really believe that

When you are troubled, burdened with care,  
And know not what to do;  
Fear ye not to call His Name  
And He will fix it for you.

Theology derived from the Black experience must reflect the rhythm and the mood, the passion and ecstasy, the joy and the sorrow of a people in a struggle to free themselves from the shackles of oppression. This theology must be Black because the people are Black. It must deal with liberation because the people are oppressed. It must be biblical because the people claim that the God of the Exodus and the prophets and of Jesus and the apostle Paul is involved in their history, liberating them from bondage. A theology derived from Black sources would have to focus on Jesus Christ as the beginning and the end of faith, because this affirmation is a summary of the Black testimony that "Jesus picked me up, turned me round, left my feet on solid ground." He is sometimes called the "Wheel in the middle of the Wheel," the "Rose of Sharon," and the "Lord of Life." Black people claim that he healed the sick, gave sight to the blind and enabled the lame to walk. "Jesus," they say, "do most anything."

## VI

The presence of Jesus as the starting point of Black theology does not mean that it can overlook the experience of suffering

in Black life.<sup>1</sup> Any theology that takes liberation seriously must also take seriously the continued presence of suffering in Black life. How can we claim that “God will fix it” for the poor when the poor still exist in poverty? The blues, folklore, and other secular expressions are constant reminders that a simplistic view of divine liberation is never adequate for a people in struggle against oppression. Black religion has never been silent on the theme of suffering. Indeed, Black faith arose out of Black people’s experience of suffering. Without the brokenness of Black existence, its pain and sorrow, there would be no reason for the existence of Black faith.

Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen,  
Nobody knows my sorrow,  
Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen,  
Glory, Hallelujah!

The “Glory, Hallelujah” at the end of that spiritual was not a denial of trouble but a faith affirmation that trouble does not have the last word on Black existence. It means that evil and suffering, while still unquestionably present, cannot count decisively against Black people’s faith that Jesus is also present with them, fighting against trouble. His divine presence counts more than the pain that the people experience in their history. Jesus is the people’s “rock in a weary land” and their “shelter in a time of storm.” No matter how difficult the pains of life might become, they cannot destroy the people’s con-

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1. For a further discussion of the theme of suffering in Black religion, see chap. 6, “God and Black Suffering,” in my book *The Spirituals and the Blues* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972; Orbis Books, 1991, 2022), and chap. 8, “Divine Liberation and Black Suffering,” in *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975; Orbis Books, 1997). This theme has been much discussed by other Black writers also; see especially William Jones, *Is God a White Racist?* (New York: Doubleday, 1973).

fidence that victory over suffering has already been won in Jesus' resurrection. Thus the people sang:

Sometimes I hangs my head an' cries,  
But Jesus going to wipe my weep'n eyes.

Of course, there is no evidence that Black people's faith-claim is "objectively" or "scientifically" true. Thus when William Jones, a Black critic of Black theology, asks about the decisive liberation event in Black history, he is asking the question from a vantage point that is external to Black faith.<sup>2</sup> For Black faith claims that Jesus is the only evidence one needs to have in order to be assured that God has not left the little ones alone in bondage. For those who stand outside of this faith, such a claim is a scandal—that is, foolishness to those whose wisdom is derived from European intellectual history. "But to those who are called, . . . Christ [is] the power of God, and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24). In Black religion, Christ is the Alpha and Omega, the One who has come to make the first last and the last first. The knowledge of this truth is not found in philosophy, sociology, or psychology. It is found in the immediate presence of Jesus with the people, "buildin' them up where they are torn down and proppin' them up on every leanin' side." The evidence that Jesus is liberating them from bondage is found in their walking and talking with him, telling him all about their troubles. It is found in the courage and strength he bestows on the people as they struggle to humanize their environment.

These answers will not satisfy the problem of theodicy as defined by Sartre and Camus. But Black faith assertions were never intended to be answers for the intellectual problems

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2. See his *Is God a White Racist?* For a fuller critique of Jones, see chap. 8 of my *God of the Oppressed*.



arising out of the European experience. They are *Black* reflections on life and were intended as testimonies for the oppressed so that they would not give up in despair. They are not rational arguments. The truth of the claims is not found in whether the Black faith perspective answers the theodicy problem as posed in Camus's *Plague* or Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*.<sup>3</sup> The truth of the Black faith-claim is found in whether the people receive that extra strength to fight until freedom comes. Its truth is found in whether the people who are the victims of *white* philosophy and theology are led to struggle to realize the freedom they talk about. The same is true for a Black theology or philosophy that seeks to speak on behalf of the people. Whether William Jones is right or whether my analysis is correct should not be decided on theoretical criteria derived from Western theology and philosophy. Pure theory is for those who have the leisure for reflection but not for the victims of the land. The truth, therefore, of our theological analysis ought to be decided by the historical *function* of our assertions in the community we claim to represent.

Whose analysis, Cone's or Jones's, leads to the historical praxis against oppression? I would contend that Black humanism, as derived from Camus and Sartre, does not lead the people to the fight against oppression but rather to give up in despair, the feeling that there is little I can do about white power. But my analysis of Black faith, with Jesus as the "Captain of the Old Ship of Zion," can lead the people to believe that their fight is not in vain. That was why Martin Luther King, Jr., could move the people to fight for justice. He had a dream that was

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3. William Jones refers to Camus and Sartre and their formulation of the problem of evil. I think that is a mistake, because the problem can easily become an intellectual issue for seminar discussions rather than something to which we are called to *fight* against in this world. I find nothing in Jones's formulation of the problem of evil that would lead me to fight against it in this world.

connected with Jesus. Without Jesus, the people would have remained passive, and content with humiliation and suffering. When I turn to Western philosophy's analysis of metaphysics and ontology, I do not know whether King was right, if rightness is defined by white rationality. But in the faith context of Black religion, King was right, because people were led to act out the faith they talked about. If Black theology is to be a theology of and for this Black faith, it will not bother too much about the logical contradictions of its assertions when they are compared with white Western philosophy. William Jones's humanism notwithstanding, some Black folk still believe that

Without God I could do nothing;  
Without God my life would fail;  
Without God my life would be rugged,  
Just like a ship without a sail.

Note the absence of philosophical skepticism in the next verse.

Without a doubt, He is my Savior,  
Yes, my strength along my way;  
Yes, in deep water, He is my anchor,  
And through faith he'll keep me all the way.

It is because Black people feel secure in "leaning and depending on Jesus" that they often lift their voices in praise and adoration, singing: "Thank you Jesus, I thank you Lord. For you brought me a mighty long ways. You've been my doctor, you've been my lawyer, and you've been my friend. You've been my everything!" These people *actually* believe that with Jesus' presence, they cannot lose. Victory over suffering and oppression is certain. If not now, then in God's own "good time," "one day, it will all be over." We will "cross the river of Jordan" and "sit down with the Father and argue with the

Son” and “tell them about the world we just come from.” Thus Black people’s struggle of freedom is not in vain. This is what Black people mean when they sing: “I’m so glad that trouble don’t last always.” Because trouble does not have the last word, we can fight *now* in order to realize in our present what we know to be coming in God’s future.