

ONE

DO WE NEED A BLACK THEOLOGY?

*Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world,
Troubles of the world, the troubles of the world.
Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world.
Goin' home to live with God.
—Negro spiritual*

Seminary was great! Sitting under the teaching of some of the most learned minds anywhere was a humbling yet enriching experience. Being directly exposed to the theological giants of past generations and discovering how God graciously used their lives and work was an encouragement well worth the price. Even more for me, however, seminary was an awakening. It was a time when I was forced to wrestle with my consciousness of who I am as a Christian in light of my cultural context. I had to ask myself whether the experiences that contributed to making me

who I am had hindered or helped me in understanding the will of God for my life. Fortunately, God used several professors, some knowingly and others unknowingly, to facilitate my spiritual quest. In fact, one incident in particular served as the catalyst for this book.

In our first required systematic theology course we discussed the doctrines of God, man, and Scripture. During the term we were required to write a research paper on a related topic of our choice. I decided to write my paper on an examination of the God of black theology.¹ My intent was to give a brief history of black theology—its roots, ideology, major proponents, etc. Then I sought to give its views of God, man, Jesus Christ, and sin. I thought it would be a provocative and unique topic (surely no one else had approached the professor with this subject in mind) and would give me an opportunity for close study of the ideas of men such as James Cone and James Washington. On receiving the paper back from my professor, I noticed that, besides the grade, he had written a question that sparked in me a deeper interest in the subject. He asked, “Is it necessary to have a black theology?”

In my paper I did not seek to validate the black theology of James Cone, James Washington, and others; nor did I try to undermine the basic premise behind the movement. In fact, I complimented the black theologians for forcing the church to grapple with issues that conservative theologians have either dismissed or denied. Perhaps the professor took my stopping short of a total denunciation of the movement as tacit approval, which was far from the truth.

Whatever the case, I found his question to be thought provoking. It did not take me long to come to an answer. Do we need a black theology? Do we need to speak theologically within the African-American context? Do we need to understand the African-American experience through a theological perspective that glorifies God and comforts his people? Emphatically and unfortunately, yes.

YES, EMPHATICALLY

I say “emphatically” on two accounts:

Considering the Alternative

We need a sound, biblical black theological perspective because an unsound, unbiblical black theological perspective is the alternative. A large constituency of Christianity—namely, those of African-American descent—believes the truth claims of God, Christ, and the Scriptures, but feels that the larger body of Christian theology has ignored their cultural context and circumstances. A theological perspective that fails to speak contextually to African-American life, whether orthodox or liberal, will not gain a hearing among people who have become skeptical of the establishment. The liberation theology that spawned the black theology of the sixties gained recognition and a measure of popularity not because it was biblically accurate, but because it sought to contextualize the gospel message to people who were being oppressed, marginalized, and disenfranchised.

During the socially turbulent fifties and sixties, America was forced to grapple with her own identity and how she was going to respond to the outcries of her disenfranchised. The voice that played the lead of those who yearned to be free and equal was the black voice. Black America, after years of degradation and inhumane treatment, was rising and demanding to be heard. The black voice cried for justice, equality, and self-determination. It demanded an equal voice in the political and economic system. It demanded that this inclusion be brought about by any means necessary. The means of choice came to be known broadly as Black Power.

The phrase *Black Power* expressed the social and political struggle of black America. It was *Black* because blackness was no longer viewed as a liability but rather as an asset. Out of this change arose the expression “I’m Black and I’m Proud!” It was *Power* because blacks were historically castigated and their voice in society rendered impotent. Now, authority and power were not just requested, but demanded—and where not granted, taken. But because Black Power was a socioeconomic movement, it did not give power to the whole person. Something was lacking in the soul of black empowerment. Black theology developed in an attempt to fill that gap.

Black theology sought to give a spiritual and theological framework to the pressing and distressing blight of black Americans during that turbulent period. Whereas Black Power was the political expression of self-determination among black Americans, black theology became the

theological expression of Black Power. Ironically, black theology's intent may have been noble, but its articulation and subsequent outcome has been less than noble. In fact, it has been theologically and biblically unacceptable. Yet without a solidly biblical voice setting African-American experience in a consistently redemptive and historical context, the black theology of the sixties and the subsequent ideologies based on it are the only alternatives.

Considering Cultural Contexts

We also need a sound black theology because theology in a cultural context not only has been permissible but has become normative. The tendency, however, is for the majority culture to see only its own thinking as normative—that is, to view its perspective as neutral, without any cultural trappings. Honesty demands that we recognize the ease with which theology is distinguished by culture. Noted evangelical author David Wells acknowledges this tendency.

That American Theology has characteristics that are distinctly American should not be surprising. We readily see that the Germans and the British, the South Americans and Asians have ways of thinking about Christian faith that seem obviously German, British, South American, and Asian. In America, however, theology is apparently not affected by its context. It is not American in content or tone. It is simply theology! At least, that is what is commonly assumed.²

Whether it is German Lutheran, Dutch or Scottish Reformed, South American Liberation, British or American Puritanism, or even Northern and Southern Presbyterianism, theology has consistently had a distinct ethnicity or culture. To deny African Americans the right to formulate and sustain a biblical theology that speaks to the cultural and religious experience of African Americans is to deny them the privilege that other ethnic groups have enjoyed.

YES, UNFORTUNATELY

Nonetheless, I say that we “unfortunately” need a black theology. An African-American perspective on theology comes more as a reaction than as a theological initiative. It has been made necessary by conservative Christians’ failure to grapple with issues of African-American history and consciousness. This is particularly evident in the areas of racism and discrimination. The sad yet irrefutable fact is that the theology of Western Christianity, dominated by white males, has had scant if any direct answers to the evils of racism and the detrimental effect of institutionalized discrimination. The major contributors to conservative theological thought over the centuries have, consciously or not, spoken predominantly to and for white people. In fact, the unfortunate reality is that the ideologies of racism and elitism that have marred the landscape of Western civilization have had a uniquely conservative Christian flavor. Those who advocated a caste system of slavery and racial superiority in places such as the United States, England,

South Africa, and India have often done so with the consent of a church defined by conservative theologians. And even though many white theologians have refuted these erroneous positions, very few have sought to positively set forth God and his providential hand in the life and struggle of African Americans.

Since the initiation of Africans to the shores of America, the destinies of white and black Americans have been inextricably intertwined. The question now is this: To what extent was this relationship destined to be that of the oppressor against the oppressed? The answer to this question, and similarly others, may not lie only in traditional American (white) theology. Rather, these questions are more satisfactorily answered in and from the context in which they are asked—thus providing a mandate for an African-American perspective on theology.

But this mandate is not without qualification. Even though there is a need for a distinctly African-American perspective on theology, the parameters of that theology must be observed: Scripture, history and tradition, and Christian experience.

SCRIPTURE, HISTORY AND TRADITION, AND EXPERIENCE

Scripture

The primary source of any sound theology is the special revelation of God contained in the Bible. Therefore, the Bible must be our ultimate authority. Whether black or

otherwise, our theology is correct only insofar as it is derived from sound exegesis of the Word of God. At the foundation of this exegesis is our submission to the text of Scripture.

As faithful theologians we must approach our text humbling ourselves to its divine inspiration and submitting to its inerrancy and infallibility.³ Because we recognize the frailty of human reason and understanding, it is incumbent upon us to assume a posture of humility and submission as we seek to pronounce ideologies about God and his creation.

Unfortunately, when we seek to prove the trustworthiness and reliability of the Bible, we often become unwitting skeptics. That is, we insist that the Bible come under the same scrutiny as any other piece of literature from antiquity. Consequently, the Bible is taken as true and reliable only after it has been shown to be the most objectively verifiable and attested-to literature we have from antiquity. While the Bible surely is verifiable and well attested, these findings do not independently prove the Bible's divine inspiration. If they did operate independently, they would essentially deny the Bible's authority. Human authorities would in effect delegate authority to the Bible after having examined it and found it worthy.

We must not come to the Bible as skeptics, demanding that it satisfy our independent judgment. Rather, we must submit to the Bible as *our* examiner, which reveals our inadequacies of understanding. If we do otherwise, we

make the Bible submit to our authority and reason, as if it receives its authority and validation from us. This must not be. Even as the people of God, we *receive* the Word. We do not authenticate the Word and thereby grant it authority. It comes to us from the source of all authority—God himself. Wilhelmus a’Brakel, the much-respected seventeenth-century divine, summed it up well:

If the Word derived its authority from the church, then we would have to hold the church in higher esteem than God Himself, for whoever gives credence and emphasis to someone’s words is superior to the person who speaks them. God has no superior and therefore no one is in a position to give authority to His words.⁴

In other words, “The authority of the Word is derived from the Word itself.”⁵

Furthermore, the faithful theologian is a biblical theologian. That is, he seeks to speak only where the Bible speaks and is satisfied to sit silent where the Bible is silent. As the Scriptures remind us, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us” (Deut. 29:29). That there are issues on which the Bible does not appear to speak does not invalidate the Scriptures. On the contrary, this silence is a faithful and humbling reminder that God is God and we are not, that his ways are above our ways and his thoughts above our thoughts (Isa. 55:8).

History and Tradition

Theology must be presented with the help of history and tradition. The role of a people's heritage and tradition must never be underestimated. In many ways we are products of the theological stances and circumstances that have historically defined our communities. And though it may sometimes be necessary to broaden our perspectives and question the status quo of theological thinking, we must do so in such a way as to carefully consider that the foundations of our communities are at stake. We are not called to reinvent the theological wheel.

Whether Reformed or Arminian, Baptist or Pentecostal, Covenantal or Dispensational, theology is always best presented within a framework of heritage and tradition. A biblical African-American perspective on theology is no different. African Americans have a rich and expressive tradition from which to draw. The deeply moving spirituals forged in the cotton and tobacco fields of the antebellum South, the protestations of Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, the devotionally mystic writings of Howard Thurman, the theological expediency of Martin Luther King Jr.—our heritage is both diverse and compelling. Preachers, teachers, and books from the past that serve to enrich our study have now enriched African-American Christianity, like most other Christian communities. Yet the beauty of a biblical African-American approach to theology is that the wellspring of heritage from which to draw is not limited to African-American Christian tradition.

As much as any other segment of Christianity, the pre-

dominantly black church in America has an acute sense of its heritage. The songs we sing and the special days we celebrate are a continual reminder of the stony road trod during seemingly endless years of suffering and pain. Our songs spoke to our understanding of our worth as children of God in spite of the oppressor's attempts at dehumanization:

I been rebuked and I been scorned,
I been rebuked and I been scorned,
Chillun, I been rebuked and I been scorned,
I'se had a hard time, sho's you born.

Talk about me much as you please,
Talk about me much as you please,
Chillun, talk about me much as you please,
Gonna talk about you when I get on my knees.

Although recognition of our history is vitally important, this recognition often does not extend far enough. We must realize that as African-American Christians our history, as much as anyone else's, is church history. We must see that our church fathers are not just Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and Andrew Bryan. Our fathers are also Augustine, Tertullian, and Ignatius. The songs we sing, "Were You There?" and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," rightly belong to us, but so do the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. We must see that our history does not begin on the Ivory Coast of Africa, but that we, like all other Christians, are the sons and daughters of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Our history is church history and as such should be reflected in our theology and our preaching. As faithful theologians we must draw upon that history to ensure that we maintain a faithful course, though we chart new territory.

Making this connection with the historic Christian faith is the beauty of seeing the African-American experience within a Reformed theological framework. The Reformed understanding sees a continuity of God's work among his people. It demonstrates redemptive history not as a collection of disjointed dispensations, but rather as a continuum of covenants whereby the history of redemption is one, belonging to all the redeemed—red and yellow, black and white.

Experience

We must recognize the significant role that Christian experience plays in our understanding of theology. All human beings are, to one degree or another, a product of their experiences. These experiences over time develop into lenses through which we view the surrounding world. The opinions, ideas, biases, and prejudices that we employ at various times are in actuality the working out of our life's most impressive experiences. This is true when we formulate theology as well.

We must be honest and admit that we come to theological study with biases and prejudices. These biases, however, are not inherently a negative. In fact, the danger is not that we look at the Scriptures with a jaundiced eye, but that we think we can look at them without one. If we recognize

our biases and the impact of our experiences, we can become more capable and insightful teachers. The Holy Spirit can use our experiences in our interpretation of Scripture and formulation of theology that is relevant and effective.

Experience has always been a key determiner in formulating our understanding of theology. For example, the impact of Martin Luther on Western civilization cannot be overstated. When he, in the most unassuming yet magnanimous gesture of the last millennium, nailed his 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg, he was beckoning the church to return to the light of truth from which it had drifted so far. Yet Luther was not simply asserting theological propositions and biblical exposition; in fact, his experience as a monk frustrated with his inability to come to grips with the holy character of God in light of his own moral inadequacies caused him to delve into the biblical and theological dogma of the church. Having peered so deeply into these things, he came away with an understanding that would change the course of human history.

Our experiences, like Luther's, can be instruments for the discovery of divine truth. God is not averse to using our experiences in order to reveal his will for us and drive us to confirm these experiences through his Word, the Bible. Unfortunately, with any conduit of knowledge, too much dependence on one element leads to a distortion of the truth. An overemphasis on God's communicating with our rational faculties leads to a rationalistic Christianity that is void of emotional content. Likewise, an overemphasis on God's communicating through our experiences leads

to an experiential Christianity that is void of rational boundaries. The unfortunate errors of nascent black theology were rooted in the assumption that experience should be the primary source of truth. The result of this experience-driven approach is that church history and even the Scriptures are relevant only insofar as they coincide with and corroborate my experience as an African American. In other words, that which does not validate my experience and indeed empower me against the oppressive white establishment is of no use in communicating the revelation of God to me.

We see that experience overemphasized is fraught with error, potential and realized. Nevertheless, though experience has been erroneously overemphasized in traditional black theology, in attempting to formulate a more scriptural approach to the African-American perspective on theology we must be careful not to underemphasize the role of experience.

No theologian can directly influence the black church more effectively than a black theologian. His experiences as a black man in America provide him with a credible and sympathetic voice. Yet his awareness of his cultural existence must be tempered with the more immediate reality of his existence in the kingdom of God, which is not bound by cultural and social categories. His identity as a Christian must inform his identity as an African American, not vice versa. A black theology that is both biblical and culturally credible will take the experiences of black people seriously and address a theology in which experience is viewed not

above but concomitant with Scripture and community. I am convinced that such theology is best articulated and maintained within the Reformed theological tradition. Thus, I suggest that “reforming” the black theological experience is not only possible but also, more importantly, necessary.

My goal in *On Being Black and Reformed* is to redeem and reform our perspective on the black American experience through the most legitimate lens available, theology—in particular, biblically based and historically grounded Reformed theology. The term *Reformed* is meant to identify with the theological formulations of the Reformed theological tradition. The Reformed understanding of God, man, sin, salvation, and the Scriptures is the most coherent and veritable of all views. It provides the most comprehensive, biblically consistent paradigm for interpreting a providentially orchestrated history.⁶

In reflecting on my theological experiences, I respectfully give deference to those men who bravely paved the way for black theology. Yet the forerunners of this theology, though noble in their intentions, failed to maintain a faithful and high view of Scripture. These failures led to a nebulous view of man, sin, history, Christ, God, and the Scriptures. Men like James Cone, James Washington, Deotis Roberts, Gayraud Wilmore, while sincerely seeking to articulate their faith in an African-American context, failed to maintain the integrity of scriptural doctrines that are pivotal and indispensable to the historic Christian faith.⁷ And though we are indebted to these men for awakening

the Christian theological community to its neglect of black America, we must not let that cloud our primary goals as theologians—to glorify God and to comfort the saints.

The black theology birthed in the sixties did provide a temporary balm for souls at a time when black people needed it most. It not only shook the conscience of mainstream theology and forced it to see that it had taken a myopic view, but also awakened the conscience of black people and gave them the assurance that they were created in the image of God and that he had a design for their existence. But by denying the essentials of the historic Christian faith and divine inspiration of Scripture, that salve became toxic, infected with nationalism and a self-destructive humanism. In fact, it became little more than a mirror of much of the racist white theology against which it posited itself. Black theology not only failed to give lasting comfort to souls, but also by default failed to glorify God. Ultimately, a theology that fails to reach one of these goals inherently fails to reach either of them.

A black Reformed theological perspective on history has the primary goal of glorifying God. We are confident that as it does so, it will in turn be a comfort to the people of God. The Reformed black theologian's prayer is an echo of the psalmist's:

*Let the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
Be acceptable in Your sight,
O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. (Ps. 19:14)*