STATEMENT DL-100-2

BLACK THEOLOGY, BLACK POWER, AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCE
(Part Two in a Three-Part Series on Liberation Theology)

by Ron Rhodes

Between 1517 and 1840 it is estimated that twenty million blacks were captured in Africa, transported to America, and brutally enslaved. The experience of these blacks — and their descendants — serves as the backdrop for understanding contemporary black liberation theology.

During slave trading days, blacks were crammed into ships like sardines into a can and brought across the Atlantic. Many died at sea from dysentery, smallpox, and other diseases. "Some starved themselves to death refusing to eat. To prevent this form of suicide, hot coals were applied to the lips to force the slaves to open their mouths to eat."[1]

Upon arriving on American shores, the slaves — men, women, and children — were forced to work from sunrise to sunset. Even old and ailing slaves were forced to work.

The brutality shown to the slaves is among the saddest chapters in American history. Black theologian Anthony Evans tells us that "black women were raped at will by their masters at the threat of death while their husbands could only look on. Families were separated as they were bought and sold like cattle."[2]

For tax purposes, slaves were counted as property — like domestic animals. Eventually, however, a question arose as to how to count slaves in the nation's population. The Congress solved the problem by passing a bill that authorized the U.S. Census Bureau to count each slave as three-fifths of a person. This Congressional compromise resulted in what one Negro writer of the 1890s called "the 'Inferior Race Theory,' the placing of the Negro somewhere between the barnyard animals and human beings."[3]

THE CHRISTIANIZATION OF SLAVERY

Initially, there was heated resistance to evangelizing among slaves. Black scholar C. Eric Lincoln tells us there were three principal reasons for this: "(1) the hearing of the gospel required time that could be economically productive; (2) slaves gathered together in a religious assembly might become conscious of their own strength and plot insurrections under cover of religious instruction; (3) there was an English tradition of long standing that once a slave became a Christian he could no longer be held a slave."[4]

In addition, many whites were repulsed at the suggestion that blacks could go to heaven. Morgan Godwyn, a graduate of Oxford University who served in churches in Virginia around 1665, wrote that slavemasters would commonly exclaim, "What, such as they? What, those black dogs be made Christians? What, shall they be like us?"[5]

Some whites tried to argue that blacks were less than human. Buckener H. Payne, in his book *The Negro: What Is His Ethnological* blacks are present with us today, they must have been in the ark. There were only eight souls saved in the ark, however, and they are fully accounted for by Noah's family. As one of the beasts in the ark, the black has no soul to be saved."[6] So why try to evangelize them?

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Regardless of such preposterous arguments, missionary work eventually began among the slaves in the early 1700s and many of them became Christians. The brand of Christianity that was preached to them, however, was one that justified slavery. It was argued that Paul and other New Testament writers issued specific instructions for master-slave relations, thus apparently sanctioning the practice. Moreover, a curse of slavery was placed on the "sons of Ham" (Gen. 9:20-27) — who were interpreted to be blacks. Furthermore, slavery was considered a "religious good," for it amounted to importing unsaved heathens to a Christian land where they could hear the gospel and be saved.

(However, though Paul gave instructions on master-slave relations, his *underlying* belief was that slaves should be freed [1 Cor. 7:21]. Moreover, a curse of slavery was placed *only on Ham's son, Canaan* **—** whose descendants later occupied Phoenicia and Palestine. *They were Caucasians.* As for slavery being a "religious good," this seems an absurd claim in view of the cruel, inhuman treatment shown to the slaves.)

Most blacks accepted the slave brand of Christianity at face value. Moreover, white missionaries persuaded the blacks that life on earth was insignificant because "obedient servants of God could expect a reward in heaven after death."[7] The white interpretation of Christianity effectively divested the slaves of any concern they might have had about their freedom in the present.

As more blacks began attending white Christian churches, restrictions in seating, communion services, and property ownership caused many blacks to seek autonomy in their own congregations and ultimately, separate denominations. So, by the mid-1700s, black slaves had begun meeting in private to worship since authentic worship with whites was impossible. There is sufficient historical evidence to conclude that themes later developed by black liberation theologians were present in these early slave meetings in at least a nascent form.

For example, God was interpreted by the slaves as a loving Father who would eventually deliver them from slavery just as He had delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage. Jesus was considered both a Savior and an elder brother who was a fellow sufferer.

Heaven had a dual implication for black slaves. Yes, it referred to the future life, but it also came to refer to a state of liberation in the present. Because of the risk involved in *preaching* liberation, the slave learned how to *sing* liberation in the very presence of his master:

> "Swing low, sweet chariot (underground railroad — conestoga wagon)
> Coming for to carry me home (up North to freedom)
> Swing low (come close to where I am),
> Sweet chariot
> Coming for to carry me home.
> I looked over Jordan (Ohio River — border between North and South)
> And what did I see,
> Coming for to carry me home
> A band of angels (northern emancipators with the underground) coming after me.
> Coming for to carry me home."[8]

THE DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK LIBERATIONIST THOUGHT

It was not long before slave theology gave rise to black activism. There are many important figures who contributed to the cause of black liberation throughout black history. We can only mention a few here.

Nat Turner (1800-1831) was the most notorious slave preacher who ever lived on American soil. Turner's hatred of slavery propelled him to seek freedom by violence. Indeed, Turner killed nearly sixty white people before being captured and hanged in September, 1831. This violent revolt marked the beginning of the black struggle for liberation.

Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) is regarded by many as "the apostle of black theology in the United States of America."[9] Martin Luther King, Jr., said Garvey "was the first man on a mass scale and level to give millions of Negroes a sense of dignity and destiny, and make the Negro feel he is somebody."[10] Garvey was one of the first to speak of seeing God through black "spectacles."

Howard Thurman, in his book *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), saw black life paralleling Jesus' life because His poverty identified Him with the poor masses. Thurman also noted that Jesus was a member of a minority group (the Jews) in the midst of a larger and controlling dominant group (the Romans). Thurman thus drew many applications for the black experience from the life of Jesus.

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) was America's most visible civil rights leader from 1955 until his assassination in April, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee. Though he cannot be called a formal participant in the black theology movement, he nevertheless roused the conscience of black America to passionate commitment to liberation.

King was an advocate of Ghandian nonviolent social change. Through nonviolent suffering, King believed that "blacks would not only liberate themselves from the necessity of bitterness and the feeling of inferiority toward whites, but would also prick the conscience of whites and liberate them from a feeling of superiority."[11] To some, King's assassination indicated that nonviolence as a means of liberation had failed and that perhaps a more revolutionary theology was needed.

Albert Cleage was one of the more militant black writers of the 1960s. His claim to fame was *The Black Messiah*, a 1968 collection of sermons in which he set forth his brand of black nationalism.

Cleage rejected the Pauline books in the New Testament. He said that — in contrast to the black Messiah — there was a spiritualized Jesus constructed by the apostle Paul who "never knew Jesus and who modified his teaching to conform to the pagan philosophers of the white gentiles....We, as black Christians suffering oppression in a white man's land, do not need the individualistic and other-worldly doctrines of Paul and the white man."[12]

THE EMERGENCE OF A FORMAL "BLACK THEOLOGY"

Over one hundred and thirty years after Nat Turner was hanged, black theology emerged as a formal discipline. Beginning with the "black power" movement in 1966, black clergy in many major denominations began to reassess the relationship of the Christian church to the black community. Black caucuses developed in the Catholic, Presbyterian, and Episcopal churches. "The central thrust of these new groups was to redefine the meaning and role of the church and religion in the lives of black people. Out of this reexamination has come what some have called a 'Black Theology.'"[13]

For the first time in the history of black religious thought, black clergy (primarily *educated, middle-class* black clergy) and black theologians began to recognize the need for a completely new "starting point" in theology. They insisted that this starting point must be defined by people at the *bottom* and not the *top* of the socioeconomic ladder. So, black theologians began to re-read the Bible through the eyes of their slave grandparents and started to speak of God's solidarity with the oppressed of the earth.

The most prolific and sophisticated writer of this new theological movement has been James Cone. No one has matched him either in terms of sheer volume of writing, or in terms of the challenge posed by his books. For this reason, we shall examine his theology in depth.

James Cone: Theologian of Black Liberation

In assessing the theology of James Cone, it is critical to recognize that he sees *black experience* as the fundamental starting point for ascertaining theological truth. And his *own* writings are a reflection of his *own* "black experience" — that is, the discrimination he suffered while growing up as a child in Bearden, Arkansas.

What was it like in Bearden? "It meant attending 'separate but equal' schools, going to the balcony when attending a movie, and drinking water from a 'colored' fountain. It meant refusing to retaliate when called a nigger unless you were prepared to leave town at the precise moment of your rebellion. You had no name except for your first name of 'boy.'"[14] Cone concedes that "my theological reflections are inseparable from the Bearden experience....What I write is urged out of my blood."[15]

Cone says that "it is this common experience among black people in America that Black Theology elevates as the supreme test of truth. To put it simply, Black Theology knows no authority more binding than the experience of oppression itself. This alone must be the ultimate authority in religious matters."[16]

From the above, one may immediately suspect that Cone has a deficient view of the authority of Scripture. Indeed, his view seems very close to the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth, as when Cone writes: "It is true that the Bible is not the revelation of God, only Christ is. But it is an indispensable witness to God's revelation."[17] Moreover, "we should not conclude that the Bible is an infallible witness."[18] Cone believes 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," which — in America — takes place experientially in God's liberating work among blacks.

Black Theology and Black Power. Based on the preeminence of "black experience," Cone defines theology as "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 liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ."[19] Cone's theology asks (and seeks to answer) the question, "What does the Christian gospel have to say to powerless black men whose existence is threatened daily by the insidious tentacles of white power?"[20]

In answering this pivotal question, Cone emphasizes that there is a very close relationship between black theology and what has been termed "black power." Cone says that *black power* is a phrase that represents both black freedom and black self-determination "wherein black people no longer view themselves as without human dignity but as men, human beings with the ability to carve out their own destiny."[21]

Cone says *black theology* is the religious counterpart of *black power*. "Black Theology is the theological arm of Black Power, and Black Power is the political arm of Black Theology."[22] And, "while Black Power focuses on the political, social, and economic condition of black people, Black Theology puts black identity in a theological context."[23]

We gain insights about what Cone means by "black theology" and "black power" by understanding what *blackness* means in his theology. Cone notes two aspects of blackness: the *physiological* and *ontological.* In the first sense, "black" indicates a physiological *trait*. It refers to "a particular black-skinned people in America."[24]

In the second sense, "black" and "white" relate not to skin pigmentation but to "one's attitude and action toward the liberation of the oppressed black people from white racism."[25] *Blackness* is thus "an ontological symbol for all people who participate in the liberation of man from oppression."[26] Seen in this light, "blackness" can be attributed to people who *do not* have black skin but who *do* work for liberation.

By contrast, "whiteness" in Cone's thought symbolizes the ethnocentric activity of "madmen sick with their own self-concept" and thus blind to that which ails them and oppresses others. Whiteness symbolizes *sickness* and *oppression*. White theology is therefore viewed as a theological extension of that sickness and oppression.[27]

Having established that the *black experience* is the governing principle in Cone's interpretation of Scripture, it is important to understand how this governing principle has affected his views of specific doctrines.

***God*.** Cone bases much of his liberationist theology on God's deliverance of Israel from oppression under the Egyptians. He says that the consistent theme in Israelite prophecy is Yahweh's concern for "the lack of social, economic, and political justice for those who are poor and unwanted in the society."[28]

This same God, Cone argues, is working for the deliverance of oppressed blacks in twentieth-century America. Because God *is* helping oppressed blacks and has identified with them, God Himself is spoken of as "black."

Black theology's dominant perspective on God is "God in action, delivering the oppressed because of His righteousness. He is to be seen, not in the transcendent way of Greek philosophy, but immanent, among His people."[29] God is "immanent" in the sense that He is met in concrete historical situations of liberation.

This is very similar to the idea of the immanence of God in process theology. Indeed, process theologian David Ray Griffin, while recognizing important differences between process and black theology, has suggested that "process philosophy supports liberation theologians in locating the reality of God's presence and creative activity in this world."[30]

Jesus Christ. Cone's intention is to stand in the Chalcedonian tradition in his understanding of Jesus Christ. The Chalcedonian creed (A.D. 451) affirmed that Christ is "truly God and truly man." Cone agrees with this, but adds that the *role* of Jesus as God-Incarnate was to liberate the oppressed: Jesus Christ "is God himself coming into the very 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."[31]

One of the more controversial aspects of Cone's Christology is his view that Jesus was (is) black: "The 'raceless' American Christ has a light skin, wavy brown hair, and sometimes — wonder of wonders — blue eyes. For whites to find him with big lips and kinky hair is as offensive as it was for the Pharisees to find him partying with tax-collectors. But whether whites want to hear it or not, *Christ is black, baby*, with all of the features which are so detestable to white society" (emphasis in original).[32]

Cone believes it is very important for black people to view Jesus as black: "It's very important because you've got a lot of white images of Christ. In reality, Christ was not white, not European. That's important to the psychic and to the spiritual consciousness of black people who live in a ghetto and in a white society in which their lord and savior looks just like people who victimize them. God is whatever color God needs to be in order to let people know they're not nobodies, they're somebodies."[33]

For Cone, the Resurrection of the black Jesus — a real event — symbolizes universal freedom for all who are bound. It is not *just* a future-oriented hope in a heavenly compensation for earthly woes. Rather, it is a hope that focuses on the *future* in such a way that it prevents blacks from tolerating *present* inequities.[34] This is closely related to Cone's understanding of eschatology (more on this shortly).

Sin and Salvation. In Cone's view, sin is "a condition of human existence in which man denies the essence of God's liberating activity as revealed in Jesus Christ."[35] In this view, sin is anything that is contrary to the oppressed community or its liberation.

Salvation for Cone primarily has to do with *earthly* reality, not *heavenly* hopes. "To see the salvation of God is to see this people [i.e., the blacks] rise up against their oppressors, demanding that justice become a reality now and not tomorrow."[36] Hence, though Cone often speaks of *Jesus* as the Liberator, in practical terms he emphasizes the *human* work of *self*-liberation among blacks and downplays divine help.

The Church. Cone believes the black church has played an instrumental role in the religious and social life of black America. He says the black church was the creation of a black people "whose daily existence was an encounter with the overwhelming and brutalizing reality of white power. For the slaves it was the sole source of identity and the sense of community....The black church became the only sphere of black experience that was free of white power."[37]

Still, Cone believes that — since the days of slavery — the black church has largely capitulated to the demands of a white racist society. He argues that in order to survive, the black churches have given up their freedom and dignity. After the Civil War, black churches became passive in the struggle for civil rights and freedom while currying favors from the white establishment. This condition, Cone says, has persisted up to the present day, rendering the black church "the lifeless pawn of the status quo."[38]

Only faithfulness to the "pre-Civil War black church tradition" will issue in "an exclusive identification with black power," Cone believes. He says that a continued emphasis on black power is "the only hope of the black church in America."[39] (Though "black power" as a *movement* faded after the 1960s, the primary *emphasis* of the movement — the dignity, freedom, and self-determination of black people — has continued in Cone's theological writings. It is this emphasis that Cone says has been missing in many black churches.)

Eschatology. Cone rejects what he terms the "white lie" that Christianity is primarily concerned with life in the next world: "If eschatology means that one believes that God is totally uninvolved in the suffering of man because he is preparing them for another world, then black theology is not eschatological. Black theology has hope for this life."[40]

Cone asks what good there is in golden crowns, slippers, and white robes "if it means that we have to turn our backs on the pain and suffering of our own children? Unless the future can become present, thereby forcing us to make changes in this world, what significance could eschatology have for black people who believe that their self-determination must become a reality now?"[41]

***Revolution and Violence*.** I would be remiss to close this discussion of James Cone without noting his views on revolution and violence. Cone defines liberation as the "emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary."[42] This definition would seem to allow for the use of violence.

Cone *does not* advocate armed revolution against white society. But some violence, he says, seems unavoidable. He points out that "the Christian does not decide between violence and non-violence, evil and good. He decides between the lesser and the greater evil. He must ponder whether revolutionary violence is less or more deplorable than the violence perpetuated by the system."[43] Injustice, slave labor, hunger, and exploitation are all violent forms that must be considered against the cost of revolutionary violence.

LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND THE BLACK CHURCH

We have seen that James Cone has developed a full theology based on a reading of Scripture through the eyeglasses of "blackness." The question is, How influential has black liberation theology been in the life of the black church in America?

C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya have recently completed a ten-year statistical study of the black church in America. They've published their findings in a hefty volume entitled, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (1990). Part of the Lincoln/Mamiya study dealt with black liberation theology: "In our urban questionnaire we asked the pastors of 1,531 urban churches, 'Have you been influenced by any of the authors and thinkers of black liberation theology?'"[44]

Responses to the urban questionnaire were quite revealing. Only 34.9 percent of urban black clergy said they had been influenced by black liberation theologians as opposed to 65.1 percent who said they had not. *Little more than one-third of the black pastors interviewed claimed any influence from this movement!*

Lincoln and Mamiya discerned that age and education were among the most significant variables in determining clergy responses:

> Clergy who are forty and under claimed to be more strongly influenced by black liberation theology than those who are older. Education was also very strongly associated with knowledge of black liberation theology. Pastors with a high school and less educational background said that they were minimally influenced by liberation theology, while those with a college education have the most positive views of the movement. The majority of the less educated pastors have neither heard of the movement nor of the names of theologians associated with it. Among educated clergy familiar with the movement, James Cone has the highest name recognition.[45]

These differences are not that surprising, Lincoln and Mamiya say, since black liberation theology is a relatively recent intellectual movement "occurring largely among the educated elite of the black clergy."[46]

Another significant variable was found to be denominational affiliation. According to Lincoln and Mamiya, the black denominations with higher educational levels among their clergy — such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church — are the major proponents of liberation theology. "The fact that the Pentecostal ministers of the Church of God in Christ, which has the largest sector of lower-class members among the seven [major black] denominations, have been scarcely influenced by this theological perspective suggests some of the class limitations of this movement."[47] This would seem to indicate that the formulators of black liberation theology have not been able to move beyond their middle-class origins, even though black liberationists have sought to do theology from the "bottom up" — that is, from the perspective of the oppressed in American society.[48]

Based on their nationwide field experience, Lincoln and Mamiya have observed that the majority of black clergy are educated as apprentices — learning "on the job" under the direction of senior clergy. What little academic education they receive is usually at the local Bible school level. Moreover, most of their reading is denominationally oriented. "It is this local level of clergy education," Lincoln and Mamiya suggest, "that the new black liberation theology has thus far failed to penetrate."[49]

Lincoln and Mamiya close with this warning: "Unless the movement of black liberation theology reaches beyond its present location in an intellectual elite and gives more attention...to a mass education of clergy and laity in the churches, the movement will continue to have minimal influence among its key constituencies."[50]

Lincoln and Mamiya are probably correct. However, the problems of black liberation theology go much deeper than a simple failure to reach the masses. This I shall make clear in what follows.

A CRITIQUE

It is difficult for a white person such as myself to critique black theology. As I write, I am mindful of James Cone's conviction that *any* criticism of black theology by a white theologian will be influenced by white racism and is thus invalid.[51] To help disarm this objection, I will draw support for each of my points from one or more black theologians.

I want to begin by affirming that black theology has made some important contributions. I will mention only four here. First, black theology has reminded us that theology — if it is going to meet the needs of twentieth century (and beyond) Christians — must find practical expression in society. Second, black theology has reminded us that God is involved with His people in real-life situations. Third, black theology has focused our attention on the need to reach out to others in the body of Christ who are suffering. And fourth, black theology serves as an indictment against the racist views that have been all-too-often (but not always) present among white people. These contributions are important and extremely relevant.

Despite these contributions, however, there are some serious problems that must be addressed. As a preface to my criticisms, I want to draw attention to Part One of this series in which I criticized the hermeneutic of Latin American liberation theology. In that article, I pointed out that Latin American theologians have approached Scripture with a preunderstanding that has led them to interpret Scripture with a bias toward the poor. I emphasized that if we are to understand the biblical author's *intended* meaning, it is imperative that preunderstandings be *in harmony with Scripture and subject to correction by it.* This same point must be made with reference to black theology. However, since I will not repeat any material from Part One, I urge the reader to review my comments on preunderstandings in that article.

"Blackness" and Scripture

In my critique of black liberation theology, I will focus my attention on the particular preunderstanding which interprets Scripture through the eyeglasses of "blackness." More specifically, I shall address the question: Is it legitimate to make the *black experience* the fundamental criterion for interpreting Scripture?

Certainly I do not wish to minimize the importance of the black experience. Nor do I want to come across as unsympathetic to the plight of African Americans in a white-dominated society. There can be little doubt that black liberation theologians have a legitimate gripe regarding the treatment of their people throughout American history. But imposing the black experience (or *any other* experience — including feminist, gay, anti-supernaturalist, New Age, mystic, etc.) onto Scripture *robs* Scripture of its intrinsic authority and distorts its intended meaning.

Theologians who make black experience all-determinative have, in a way, made the same mistake some white racists did during the days of slavery — only in reverse. Just as some whites imposed their "experience" as slavemasters onto Scripture in order to justify slavery, so some blacks have imposed the "black experience" onto Scripture to justify their radical views on liberation. *Both positions have erred.* For blacks to use such an experience-oriented methodology is to condone the very *kind of* method used by those who enslaved them. In my thinking, this is self-defeating at best.

Black theologian Anthony Evans directly challenges Cone's methodology by arguing that the black experience must be seen as "real but not revelatory, important but not inspired."[52] Black writer Tom Skinner agrees and argues that "like any theology, black theology must have a frame of reference.... There are some black theologians who seek to make their frame of reference purely the black experience, but this assumes the black experience is absolutely moral and absolutely just, and that is not the case. There must be a moral frame of reference through which the black experience can be judged."[53] That frame of reference must be Scripture.

To produce a *biblical* liberation theology, Scripture — not the "black experience"— must be the *supreme authority* in matters of faith and practice. By following this approach, a strong *biblical* case can be constructed against racism — something I would think *should* be at the very heart of a biblical black theology.

The unity of the human race, for example, is a consistent emphasis in Scripture — in terms of *creation* (Gen. 1:28), the *sin problem* (Rom. 3:23), *God's love* for all men (John 3:16), and the *scope of salvation* (Matt. 28:19). The apostle Paul emphasized mankind's unity in his sermon to the Athenians: "From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live" (Acts 17:26). Moreover, Revelation 5:9 tells us that God's redeemed will be from "every tribe and tongue and people and nation." Because of the unity of humanity, there is no place for racial discrimination — white, black, or otherwise — for all men are equal in God's sight.

Transcending Culture

In Part One, I criticized the hermeneutic of Latin American liberation theology for its inability to develop a culture-transcending theology. Black theology's hermeneutic — with its emphasis on the "black experience" — is open to the same criticism.

A passage relevant to this is John 4 where we find Jesus confronting a Samaritan woman. Here Jesus deals with the relationship between *truth* and *culture*.

The Jews considered the Samaritans an "unclean" mixed breed — with Israelite and Assyrian ancestry. Because of this, the Jews were harshly prejudiced against the Samaritans and discriminated against them. This cultural hostility led the Samaritan woman to ask Jesus: "'You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?' (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans)" (John 4:9).

During the ensuing discussion, the woman asked Jesus about which cultural place of worship was valid: Mt. Gerizim where the Samaritans built their temple, or Jerusalem where the Jews built theirs. Anthony Evans alerts us to the significance of Jesus' response: "Jesus does not hesitate to let her know that once you bring God into the picture, the issue is no longer culture, but truth. He informs her that the question is not Mt. Gerizim or Jerusalem, that it is not according to Samaritan tradition or Jewish tradition (v. 21). In fact, He denounces her cultural heritage in relation to worship, for he told her, 'Ye worship ye know not what' (v. 22). When she began to impose her culture on sacred things, Christ invaded her cultural world to tell her she was spiritually ignorant."[54]

Jesus transcended the whole issue of culture in discussing spiritual issues with the woman. When it came to her relationship with God, the issue moved from her cultural *heritage* to her *heart* and the criteria for that relationship was *truth*. Jesus acknowledged cultural distinctions, but disallowed them when they interfered in any way with truth about God. A principle we can derive from this is: Culture must *always* take back seat to the truth of God as revealed in Scripture.

What does this passage say to the relationship of Scripture to the black experience? Evans answers: "It says that we as black people cannot base our relationship with God, or our understanding of God, on our cultural heritage....Jesus is not asking blacks to become white or whites to become Jews, but he insists that all reflect God's truth as given in Scripture. Where culture does not infringe upon the Word of God, we are free to be what God created us to be, with all the uniqueness that accompanies our cultural heritage. However, the truth from Scripture places limits on our cultural experience."[55]

Reconciliation: The Better Way

A *biblical t*heology of liberation must include an emphasis on *reconciliation* among men, without which the theology *ceases to be Christian* (Eph. 2:14ff.). Black liberation theologian DeOtis Roberts (b. 1927), though committed to liberation, agrees with this and insists that black theology must speak of "reconciliation that brings black men together and of reconciliation that brings black and white men together."[56] Roberts says "it is my belief that true freedom overcomes estrangement and heals the brokenness between peoples."[57] However, Roberts argues, "reconciliation can take place only between equals. It cannot co-exist with a situation of Whites over Blacks."[58]

Roberts's point is well taken. *Reconciliation and racism* are birds of a different feather; they never fly together. Genuine reconciliation can come only if people — both black and white — commit to a *scriptural* view of their brothers of a different color, seeing *all* people as created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26) and of infinite value to God (1 Cor. 6:20; 1 Pet. 1:18).

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There is much more that needs to be said on this important issue, but space forbids. As the theological dialogue continues in coming years, I would like to suggest the following goal: Let us all — both black and white — seek to build a body of unified believers who are so committed to the Scriptures and to Christ that the name *Christian* becomes truly descriptive of who they are, and not the color of their skin.

NOTES

[1] William L. Banks, *The Black Church in the U.S.* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 12.
[2] Anthony T. Evans, *Biblical Theology and the Black Experience* (Dallas: Black Evangelistic Enterprise, 1977), 19.
[3] James W. English, "Could Racism Be Hereditary?", *Eternity*, September 1970, 22.
[4] C. Eric Lincoln, "The Development of Black Religion in America," *Review and Expositor* 70 (Summer 1973):302.
[5] *Ibid*., 303.
[6] Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 543.
[7] James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (hereafter *Theology*) (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 121.
[8] Emmanuel McCall, "Black Liberation Theology: A Politics of Freedom," *Review and Expositor* 73 (Summer 1976):330; cf. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 352.
[9] Lindsay A. Arscott, "Black Theology," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 10 (April-June 1986):137.
[10] Quoted by Clair Drake, Foreword to *Garveyism as a Religious Movement*, Randall Burkett (Metucher, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1978), 15.
[11] James H. Cone, "Black Theology in American Religion," *Theology Today* 43 (April 1986):13.
[12] Albert B. Cleage, *The Black Messiah* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969), 4.
[13] Charles V. Hamilton, *The Black Preacher in America* (New York: William Morrow, 1972), 140.
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[17] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (hereafter *Liberation*) (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippencott, 1970), 66.
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[19] *Ibid*., 17-18.
[20] *Ibid*., 32.
[21] Cone, *Theology*, 6.
[22] James H. Cone, "Black Power, Black Theology," *Theological Education* 6 (Spring 1970):209.
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[27] *Ibid*., 29.
[28] *Ibid*., 19.
[29] H. Wayne House, "An Investigation of Black Liberation Theology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139 (April-June 1982):163.
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[33] James H. Cone, interviewed by Barbara Reynolds, *USA Today*, 8 November 1989, 11A.
[34] Cone, *Liberation*, 21.
[35] *Ibid*., 190.
[36] *Ibid*., 227.
[37] James H. Cone, "Black Theology and Black Liberation," in *Black Theology: The South African Voice*, ed. Basil Moore (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1973), 92, 96.
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[39] Cone, *Theology*, 109.
[40] *Ibid*., 123.
[41] Cone, *Liberation*, 241-42.

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