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WHAT'S WRONG WITH BLACK THEOLOGY?

by La Shawn Barber

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Every Christian is under a biblical mandate to share the gospel with all men and all nations. Along with this mandate, “old” believers may find themselves helping new believers in diverse nations and cultures learn what it means to obey Christ, to grow in grace, and to prepare themselves for their own part in fulfilling the Great Commission.

Christianity crosses cultural and subcultural boundaries. Naturally, where, when, and how individuals grow up affect their faith. While Christ was fully God and fully man, for example, Christ the man lived among Jews, who had a distinct culture. During His preaching ministry, He used parables and analogies that people in that specific culture could relate to, but He also shared culture-transcending truths, such as the reality of sin, a just God’s requirement to punish sin, and the Son’s substitutionary atonement for our sins.

Culture affects how we practice our faith. The practice of faith in China or Saudi Arabia, for example, looks different from practice anywhere in the United States. When believers face government restrictions, imprisonment, or even death—rather than mere mockery—for practicing the faith, their commitment takes on a more substantial quality.

Believers are not forbidden to recognize and celebrate their distinct experiences. They affect every area of our lives, including our faith. But our faith should inform every area of our lives, not the other way around. Christ is the supreme authority of our faith and practice, not our race, ethnicity, sex, or experiences.

The Foundation. So-called black theology in the United States is a direct result of subcultural influences that fomented during slavery. As theology is the study of the nature of God and religious truth, black theology reflects on these subjects in the context of the general black American experience. One of the reasons black theology developed in some form or another was racial discrimination and black Americans’ reaction to it. It is a tradition, and like any other, it must be examined against Scripture.

Anthony J. Carter, author of *On Being Black and Reformed*, wrote that some white Christians, particularly slave owners, were hesitant to evangelize their slaves. They thought if slaves became saved, owners would have to set them free. Others didn’t want to spend the time it would take to instruct slaves in the faith, which they believed was necessary for baptism. And others thought Africans were too bestial and, therefore, incapable of instruction.

Whites who did evangelize slaves taught a brand of slavery that justified the condition based on Scripture, explaining that slavery was part of the Roman Empire in which Christ taught. While the Bible neither condemns slavery nor encourages it, Scripture does speak against slavery’s abuses.

Slavery-era Christians in the North tended to be orthodox in their beliefs, influenced by the Puritans. Blacks in the South developed a distinct theological tradition. In the doctrines of general and special revelation, for example, slaves emphasized “subjective and immediate experience,”¹ and believed

God reveals Himself through visions, voices, and signs, as opposed to the orthodox view that God reveals Himself in nature, the conscience, and Scripture.

Christianity among blacks began to grow, thanks to the “unfettered zeal” of white Baptists and Methodists.² Revival movements in the years after the Civil War resulted in the growth of Christianity among blacks. Biblical justifications for slavery, segregated seating and second-class treatment in white churches, and the desire for self-determination are several reasons blacks began to form their own churches.

Black Christians, enslaved or free, were in a unique position that in some senses paralleled that of Israelites enslaved in Egypt. Just as God freed His chosen people from Pharaoh, He would free blacks in America from slavery and oppression. Christ was viewed not only as Savior, but also as Deliverer and Liberator.

The Development. As black Christians tried to understand the incongruity between what they were taught about Christ and being subjected to sometimes cruel treatment from Christ-professing whites, they practiced a faith that spoke to their condition. “Liberation theology” takes many forms. In the black American context, it developed through the preaching and writings of men such as Nat Turner, a slave rebellion leader, Marcus Garvey, Howard Thurman, and Martin Luther King, Jr. It wasn’t until the civil rights movement’s “black power” (freedom and self-determination) phase that a more or less formal black theology emerged.

Black theology has its roots in liberal theology, which began to spread in the progressivism era of the late nineteenth century, with a focus on so-called social justice. Unlike conservative theology, liberal theology views Scripture as fallible. Like liberal theology, black theology attempts to apply Christian principles to social problems that impact blacks.

James Cone is probably the most well-known expositor of black theology. Born in 1938, Cone grew up when racial segregation was legal, and his experiences shaped how he viewed God and the Bible. He said the experience of oppression “alone must be the ultimate authority in religious matters,” and so he interpreted Scripture through a racial lens. For the gospel to be relevant to blacks, Cone contended it must emphasize liberation of the poor and oppressed, as Christ was liberator of the oppressed.³

Reading Scripture through a racial lens meant the doctrines of God, sin, salvation, the church, and the like, were affected. For example, Cone asserted Christ was black and that blacks should see Him as such. “That’s important to the psyche 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 the people who victimize them.”⁴ Cone called sin “a condition of human existence in which man denies the essence of God’s liberating activity as revealed in Jesus Christ.”⁵

While black theology may not be quite as radical as it once was, its message reverberates even among blacks born after legal segregation was dismantled. Jeremiah Wright, President Barack Obama’s former pastor, is an example of someone who preached race and politics from the pulpit and was admired by Obama, who grew up in a racially mixed environment.

The Truth. The black Jesus/black liberation theology of the 1960s sounds dated in 2010. Blacks in America have made enormous social progress. Arguably, the church’s growing secularism is a more pressing problem today than unbiblical race-based theology. As the black church in particular sought to view the Bible through a racial and political lens, it has undermined the central role Scripture should play in our lives.

Filtering Scripture through race or sex should instinctively strike Christians as problematic; labeling theology “black” or “white” or “Latino” or “feminist,” even more so. The most wonderful enduring truth about Christ is that He’s no respecter of persons. It is not unbiblical to recognize differences or to incorporate them into worship, as long as Christ and Scripture remain the supreme authority of our faith and practice.

The kind of black theology Reformed Christian Anthony J. Carter supports is different from Cone’s brand of race-filtered theology. Carter said theology has always had an ethnic or cultural context,

and lists German Lutheran and Scottish Reformed traditions as examples. In that regard, he says a **biblical** black theology is necessary, because the alternative is an unbiblical black theology. “The unfortunate errors of nascent black theology were rooted in the assumption that experiences should be the primary source of truth,”⁶ Carter writes. He notes that men like Cone didn’t maintain the integrity of doctrine “pivotal and indispensable to the historic Christian faith.”⁷

Everyone is shaped by his experiences. Sex, race, and where and how we spent our formative years influence us. Black Christians in America were shaped by their experiences as slaves and subjects of legal segregation. The hypocrisy they perceived among white Christians, along with slow justice and feelings of powerlessness, took a physical and mental toll. Imagining a just God who looked like them and cared about their plight helped them make sense of the world.

Today’s segregated Sunday mornings are nothing to mourn over. Generally, predominantly black and predominantly white churches have different worship styles, and these preferences are one reason why people in the same ethnic group tend to worship together. Worship styles that take into account subcultural influences aren’t wrong *per se*. Regardless of the manner of worship a church allows, the gospel itself must be clear and unadulterated. Our faith shapes who we are, not the other way around.

There is no black or white or feminist gospel. Christians should be familiar with Galatians 3:26–29: “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (NKJV).

While these words don’t deny that God created us with differences, those in Christ are equal *spiritually*. We are one in Him as part of a dynamic body, and a theology that elevates race above faith is unbiblical.

Christ’s words and promises transcend the past, penetrate the present, and traverse the future. No matter what has happened in the past, Christ desires that believers strive to be more like Him *now*. Struggling every day to live the Christian life, it’s difficult to keep spiritual things above the temporal and to forgive others the way Christ forgave us. But that’s part of the Fall. It will continue to be a struggle until Christ returns. In the meantime, He wants us to understand that in His eyes, not necessarily in the person’s across the church aisle or in the church across town, we are spiritual equals.

With that assurance, we may exercise our liberty in shaping worship styles that resonate with us within a cultural or subcultural context shaped by experiences, while maintaining a high view of Scripture and imperative of the gospel. As we embark on the Great Commission, we will meet people who don’t share our experiences, but we know the message we deliver surpasses those differences.

—La Shawn Barber

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NOTES

1. Thabiti Anyabwile, *The Decline of African American Theology: From Biblical Faith to Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 33.
2. Anthony J. Carter, *On Being Black and Reformed: A New Perspective on the African-American Experience* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P and R Publishing, 2003), 54.
3. Ron Rhodes, “Black Theology, Black Power, and the Black Experience,” *Christian Research Journal* 13, 4 (1991): 27–32 (<http://journal.equip.org/articles/black-theology-black-power-andthe-black-experience>).
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Carter, 14.
7. *Ibid.*, 15.