

# Liberating Black Theology



**The Bible** and the  
**Black Experience** in America

ANTHONY B. BRADLEY

 **CROSSWAY**  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*Liberating Black Theology: The Bible and the Black Experience in America*

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# Setting the Stage: Defining Terms and Theological Distinctions

*The fact that so many people are surprised to hear that anger in some of Reverend Wright's sermons simply reminds us of the old truism that the most segregated hour in American life occurs on Sunday morning.*<sup>1</sup>

**BARACK OBAMA**



This book explores the identification of the human person primarily as a victim in black liberation theology, beginning with the work of James Cone, and suggests an alternate strategy for developing a Christian approach for understanding the black experience in America while remaining faithful to Scripture and orthodox theology. The overall thesis is that Cone's starting point for black identity as victim supplies a fundamentally flawed theological anthropology for later developments in black liberation theology. The flawed anthropology set the stage for the demise of black liberation theology beyond major recent criticism.<sup>2</sup> To explore the scope of this claim we must fully be introduced to the work of James Cone, the chief architect of black liberation theology.

<sup>1</sup>"Obama's Church Takes On Wright Controversy," Associated Press, March 23, 2008, MSNBC online, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/23771205/>.

<sup>2</sup>Alistair Kee, *The Rise and Demise of Black Theology* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006). Kee argues that black theology is dead because black theology presents inadequate analyses of race and gender and no account at all of class (economic) oppression. Black theology simply repeats the mantras of the 1970s. While content with American capitalism, it fails to address the true source of the impoverishment of black Americans. Content with romantic connections to Africa, this "African-American" movement fails to defend contemporary Africa against what Kee believes is predatory American global ambitions.

## WHAT IS BLACK THEOLOGY?

A clear definition of black theology was first given formulation in 1969 by the National Committee of Black Church Men:

Black theology is a theology of black liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievements of black humanity. Black theology is a theology of "blackness." It is the affirmation of black humanity that emancipates black people from white racism, thus providing authentic freedom for both white and black people. It affirms the humanity of white people in that it says "No" to the encroachment of white oppression.<sup>3</sup>

The context of the statement may explain, in part, the intensity of the statement. This definition was forged at the height of the civil rights movement, when the black church began to focus its attention beyond helping blacks cope with national racial discrimination and move on to applying theology to address the unique issues facing blacks, particularly in urban areas. Bruce Fields explains that black theology seeks to make sense of the sociohistorical experience of blacks in the light of their confession that God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup>

While black theology affirms blackness, that theology should not be construed as an antiwhite reactionary theology. The notion of blackness is not merely a reference to skin color but rather is a symbol of oppression that can be applied to all persons of color who have a history of oppression, as well as to other marginalized groups such as homosexuals.<sup>5</sup>

Black liberation theologians seek to apply theology in a manner that affirms the humanity of blacks in ways that they believe were previously denied. Saying no to being oppressive helps whites no

<sup>3</sup>James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume I: 1966–1979* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 101.

<sup>4</sup>Bruce Fields, *Introducing Black Theology: Three Crucial Questions for the Evangelical Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 13.

<sup>5</sup>Kelly Brown Douglas, "Homophobia and Heterosexism in the Black Church and Community," in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*, ed. Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude Jr. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 999.

longer to see their oppression as normal and gives blacks an understanding that their lives matter to God.

Black theology begins with the life experience of oppression and formulates theology respectively. The overall emphasis of black liberation theology is the black struggle for liberation from various forms of white racism and oppression, and it views the imperatives of the Christian gospel to that end.

## VICTIMOLOGY AND BLACK THEOLOGY

John McWhorter's articulation of victimology will be used in this study to denote a more robust understanding of the victimologist's way of thinking. McWhorter's description provides a critical context for comprehending the long-term effects of reducing the black experience to that of victim. In the end, victimology perpetuates a separatist and elitist platform that provides no opportunity for racial reconciliation.

Victimology is the adoption of victimhood as the core of one's identity.<sup>6</sup> It is a subconscious, culturally inherited affirmation that life for blacks in America has been in the past and will be in the future a life of being victimized by the oppression of whites. In today's terms, it is the conviction that, forty years after the Civil Rights Act, conditions for blacks have not substantially changed.<sup>7</sup> It is most clearly seen in race-related policy and through interpersonal evaluation among blacks. Ironically, notes McWhorter, the forced desegregation of the United States in the 1960s actually exacerbated victimology. During this time period, it became acceptable for blacks to confront whites with their frustration and resentment. This freedom of expression gained in the 1960s, coupled with a postcolonial inferiority complex, provides the historical basis for victimology.

McWhorter raises good concerns about grounding one's identity in the condition of being a victim despite abundant evidence to

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<sup>6</sup>John McWhorter, *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America* (New York: Perennial, 2001), 3.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

the contrary. The overall result, says McWhorter, is that “the remnants of discrimination hold an obsessive indignant fascination that allows only passing acknowledgment of any signs of progress.”<sup>8</sup> Many blacks, infused with victimology, wield self-righteous indignation in the service of exposing the inadequacies of the “other” (e.g., white person) rather than finding a way forward. The perpetual belief in a racial identity born out of self-loathing and anxiety often leads to more time spent inventing reasons to cry racism than working toward changing social mores and often inhibits movement toward reconciliation and positive mobility.<sup>9</sup>

Focusing on one’s victimhood often addresses a moral desire—it is a salve for insecurity. McWhorter maintains that many blacks are rarely able to see racial issues outside of the victimologist milieu and are trapped into reasoning racially in terms of the permanent subjugation of blacks by whites. He concludes that holding so tightly to the remnants of discrimination often creates more problems than it solves.

McWhorter goes on to explain that victimology often perpetuates racial tension. Blacks are encouraged by one another to “know your history.”<sup>10</sup> The communicative function of said mantra is not aimed toward knowledge per se but toward remembering oppression and iniquity so it does not happen again. The irony of victimology is its tendency toward revisionist histories and creating an ethos that, a hundred years ago, would have precluded racial equality. Victimology, in other words, is *perpetuating* problems for black America, not solving them.

McWhorter articulates three main objections to victimology: (1) Victimology condones weakness in failure. It tacitly stamps approval on failure, lack of effort, and criminality.<sup>11</sup> Behaviors and patterns that are self-destructive are often approved of as cultural or are presented as unpreventable consequences from previous systemic patterns. (2) Victimology hampers progress because, from

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 43–49.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 43.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

the outset, it focuses attention on obstacles. For example, in black theology the focus is on the impediment to black freedom because of the Goliath of white racism. (3) Victimology keeps racism alive because many whites are constantly painted as racist with no evidence provided. These charges may create a context for backlash and resentment, which may fuel attitudes in the white community not previously held or articulated.

Perhaps the most significant tragedy of a victimologist's approach, in McWhorter's view, is that it creates separatism.<sup>12</sup> Separatism is a suspension of moral judgment in the name of racial solidarity that is an integral part of being culturally black in America today.<sup>13</sup> The black experience is the starting point and the final authority for interpreting moral prescriptions, both personally and structurally. Separatist morality is not a deliberate strategy for accruing power; rather, it is a cultural thought—a tacit conviction that has imbued the culturally black psyche. Separatism is a direct result of victimology because whites are viewed in eternal opposition to the black experience; black America construes itself (albeit in many cases unintentionally) as a sovereign, cultural authority.

Separatism generates a restriction of cultural authority, a narrowing of intellectual inquiry, and the dilution of moral judgment. Mainstream American culture, when refracted through the lens of victimology, renders even the most ubiquitous cultural products and ideas “white.” For example, Manning Marable, a professor at Columbia University, has explicitly exhorted black scholars to focus exclusively on “black issues.” In doing so, he squelches intellectual curiosity (a basic good) outside the purview of the black American agenda.<sup>14</sup> Separatism is the sense that to be truly black, one must restrict his allegiance to black-oriented culture and assent to different rules of argumentation and morality. Few blacks, however, would admit that this is true. The truth, writes McWhorter, is that “the culturally black person is from birth

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 50–81.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 68.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 52–53. Howard University is a historically black university in Washington, D.C.

subtly inculcated with the idea that the black person—*any* black person—is not to be judged cold, but considered in light of the acknowledgment that black people have suffered.”<sup>15</sup> In the victimologist’s worldview, black suffering is the proper lens through which all else is to be evaluated.

Ultimately, McWhorter warns against separatism. Separatism has, in the name of self-protection, encouraged generations of blacks to set low goals. Blacks have settled for less, not just in respect to racial integration, but also in respect to being human persons.

What James Cone and those who followed him came to develop is not only a theology predicated on the autonomous black person as a nearly permanent victim of white aggression but also a separatist theological system, all in the name of contextualization. This newly developed theology, based on victimology, not only jettisons orthodox Christianity but also impedes opportunities for ecclesial reconciliation.

## **DISTINCTIONS IN TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN TEACHING**

The natural question after being introduced to black liberation theology is to inquire about the major differences between this tradition and orthodox Christianity that would serve as the basis of critique. In other words, how does black liberation theology compare to what Christians have traditionally taught? In order to clearly delineate the objections that historic Christianity might raise against James Cone and other black liberation theologians, it is necessary to introduce a few key distinctions that demonstrate the dislocation of black theology from the rest of Christian orthodoxy. This section also will serve as a trailer of sorts to the comparative points throughout the book. As an example, I have chosen the theological presentations of Herman Bavinck and Louis Berkhof to summarize a general orthodox position on various themes in Christian theology.

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 72.

## The Doctrine of God and Scripture

God presents himself in the biblical story as the divine “I AM” (Ex. 3:14–15), the creator of heaven and earth and the great redeemer of his people. Orthodox Christianity has known God by his eternal love, power, and sovereignty as creator and redeemer. This God, as summarized by Louis Berkhof, is articulated in Scripture as a God who redeems. His attributes include his self-existence (Ps. 33:11; John 5:26), immutability (Num. 23:19; Heb. 6:17), infinity (1 Kings 8:27; Jer. 23:23), perfect knowledge (Ps. 139:1–16; Heb. 4:13), wisdom (Rom. 11:33; Col. 1:16), goodness (Ps. 36:6; Matt. 5:45), love (Rom. 15:9; 1 John), holiness (Ex. 15:11; Isa. 57:15), righteousness (Ps. 99:4; Rom. 1:32), veracity (Num. 23:19; 2 Tim. 3:13), sovereignty (Eph. 1:11; Rev. 4:11), and omnipotence (Gen. 18:14; Matt. 3:9; 26:53).<sup>16</sup>

What Cone and those who follow him fail to do is ground black theology in the full authority of the Scriptures. This fundamental presupposition regarding God and his Word is the only proper starting point for constructing any theological vision. As we will see in subsequent chapters, this is a central belief that many black liberation theologians jettison. If we do not begin with God in our understanding of the human person, we will not develop a proper understanding of what the human person is in the fullest possible sense.

Herman Bavinck provides a cogent understanding of this theological first principle.<sup>17</sup> Bavinck teaches that all knowledge of God comes to us from his revelation and that we, on our own, cannot appropriate its content except by sincere and childlike faith. Bavinck is quick to note that theology must be grounded in how God presents himself directly, not in the self-reference of the human person. If theology is not grounded in Scripture but is instead grounded in the mind of man, the entire edifice of theology, however skillfully and creatively constructed, collapses like a house of cards. No knowledge of God is possible except that which proceeds

<sup>16</sup>Louis Berkhof, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1934), 34–41.

<sup>17</sup>Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 1: Prolegomena*, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 208–233.