

The Segregated Hour



The Segregated Hour

*A Layman's Guide
to the History of Black Liberation Theology*

JEREMY LUCAS

WIPF & STOCK • Eugene, Oregon

THE SEGREGATED HOUR

A Layman's Guide to the History of Black Liberation Theology

Copyright © 2009 Jeremy Lucas. All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical publications or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher. Write: Permissions, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3, Eugene, OR 97401.

Wipf & Stock

A Division of Wipf and Stock Publishers

199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3

Eugene, OR 97401

www.wipfandstock.com

ISBN 13: 978-1-60608-396-3

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

Contents

Introduction vii

- 1 Anything But Civil 1
- 2 The First Movement for Civil Rights 10
- 3 Poor Man Out 16
- 4 Depression of the Darker Brother 21
- 5 Malcolm and Martin 25
- 6 The War on Poverty 31
- 7 The Fight for Black Power 40
- 8 Between Heaven and Earth 47
- 9 The Most Segregated Hour 61
- 10 Faith, Work, and Politics as Usual 67

Conclusion 77

Bibliography 81



Introduction

WITH REGARD to the most prominent content of this book, I must confess that my age and the color of my skin are both reasonable limitations to understanding, much less explaining, one of the most controversial subjects in American history. For many years, I was the silent product of an integrated society now reaping the benefits and challenges of a movement long gone. I have never been a victim of social injustice or an affiliate of white oppression. You will not find me among the ashes of a broken family or the riches of an affluent minority. I am, if anything, a common man of faith who loves his Lord, his family, and his imperfect country.

While there are no rules that can prevent one man from telling another man's story, I fully accept the strong possibility that I am insufficient to the task at hand. Over the years, it has become socially inappropriate for a white man to speak of black history with any racial discernment because he himself is not the subject of his own account. Let the record show that I am willing to risk a violation of this order but will make every effort to be objective in the pages that follow.



For most Americans of the present day, our national history as a people is only appreciated through the lens of the generations we represent. Baby boomers cherish the victories of a war their parents fought, Generation X-ers still wonder why they ever had to hide in the cellar, and millennial kids can't imagine what life was like before the Internet. Trying to communicate any level of

comprehensive American history often requires a different approach for each audience.

The eldest generation has, dare I say, the greatest attention span for information, so long as the history within which they lived is not redefined. While they have little tolerance for loose interpretations of the past, their attentive nature will hear out the vast majority of arguments if the information is reliable. However, for many the study of history still remains a sacrilegious activity if their own memories are made to appear incompatible with the new picture of history being introduced.

For those who make up what is known as Generation X, history has become a critical practice where no topic is off limits. These are the young people who grew up in homes where the terrors of a Cold War merged from what *might* have happened to what *never* happened. They learned that history is made up of imperfect people and imperfect nations all vying for their own right to succeed. More often than not, this is a generation of Americans who are open to seeing our national past with a critical lens of historical curiosity.

Millennials are, perhaps, the most difficult to comprehend because no dominant, mature voice has emerged to represent them. Unlike either of the previous generations, this group has learned through technological means that yesterday, quite literally, is old news. (The seventh winner of “American Idol” is far more relevant than the third or fourth.) Almost all of history, for them, represents a completely different world from anything they know today. As a result, their generation tends to be somewhat indifferent toward the events of our national past.

Depending on the generation, discussions of our racially divided history can produce a very different set of opinions. American slavery has become an abstract institution that we acknowledge, but with great difficulty imagining how it was ever justified. There are no living defenders of its practice. A little closer but no less abstract is public segregation. Children might

still poke fun at one another's skin color, but they would never consider it serious enough to require separate facilities. We simply live in a different world than the one we so often read. The farther we get from our past, the more diverse we become in our convictions about what matters and what does not.

Black Liberation, for many Americans, is an irrational ideology that has no political purpose for the present day. From a distance, it seems incredibly out of touch with the way most people have evolved in their racial maturity. For the boomers who saw it emerge, Black Liberation represents the violent thinking of an era they wish to forget. For others, it seems curiously opposed, in theory, to the ideals of a postmodern culture. And yet, for causes rarely understood, Black Liberation has continued to thrive for decades in some of the most desolate neighborhoods of American society.

Residents of the inner city have a long history of fighting for survival during the week and turning to the steeple at the end of the road on Sunday morning. Fiery sermons and lively worship have established the Black Church as a traditional place of hope for those who have few or no tangible blessings when the service has ended. Their message, for the most part, has always been simple: when the world breaks your spirit, the Lord will build it back up with the help of the church.

Toward the end of the civil rights movement, these two institutions of African American history, the Black Liberation movement and the Black Church, were merged together in what became known as Black Liberation Theology.¹ Their progress to that point is the subject of this book. But before I begin, it seems only fair to explain briefly why someone such as myself would have ever become so engaged with the issue.



1. It should be noted that there are many, many black churches operating independently from the views of Black Liberation and/or the teachings of Black Theology.

Several years ago, my wife and I moved to a quiet little town in Virginia where we both intended to work for a few years at the local university. Although I had lived in cities all over the United States and felt prepared for our new adventure, we soon discovered a culture shock like none we could have expected. Much to our surprise, racial segregation was very much alive and well.

I could recall watching the Grisham-inspired film “A Time to Kill” just before the turn of the century from a living room in the Pacific Northwest and thinking that the distant Mississippi setting was anything but realistic. Nowhere in the country, it seemed, could so much racial tension persist underneath the surface. And while it is true that the town of Canton had been fictionalized, it never truly occurred to me that racism was still so prevalent in the nation that I loved. Nor did I imagine that there could be a town quite so hampered by a past that many Americans now considered ancient history.

Our new small town home in Virginia had been the site of strikes and school closures that occurred as a result of enforcing *Brown v. the Board of Education* more than half a century before. Many of the children who lost their opportunity at an education during those years were now mothers, fathers, and grandparents living in the same town. Not much had changed in the community since the civil rights movement, and racial segregation was far more obvious than one might otherwise expect. The town was out of date, the jobs were sparse, and yes, the schools were still heavily segregated by the court of public opinion.

I worked as an assistant catering director for the university, and most of our salaried management shared the same story: we were well paid and we were white. Most of our employees who worked in the preparation and serving of each meal on campus shared their own story: they were underpaid and they were black. The racial contrast between staff and management was staggering.

Cheyenne was a mother of three who worked in my department. She had no husband, no car, no phone, and no prospects for the future. Across the street from our campus was a McDonald's restaurant offering \$7.00/hr to all new hires, but Cheyenne insisted on staying with our staff at a pay of less than \$6.00/hr because she simply could not risk a shift in the pay period. Her home had been built by Habitat for Humanity, but she was in danger of defaulting on an already low mortgage. Between her full time service at the school and her full time care of children at home, she was a classic example of an economic depression most noticeable in the black community.

Each year, it fell on me to evaluate Cheyenne as a candidate for higher wages, but it wasn't long before I realized that this was just an illusory task I had given myself. No matter how hard she worked or how much I felt she deserved, the corporate powers that be would only permit a five cent pay raise. Some in our office had whispered rumors of the decade before my arrival when this same woman had been given a two cent raise.

From time to time, whether from frustration with life or income, Cheyenne would break down into tears in my office. Almost without knowing, I had become her advocate as well as her enemy. The notion of paying people for the value of their labor was common sense as far as I was concerned, but when I approached my superiors, the road blocks were far beyond my reach. As I soon discovered, Cheyenne was not the only one on the dining staff who faced an uphill climb. The challenges were widespread and troubling. Even if I cared deeply about their misfortune, they knew that I wouldn't be there forever.

My title and social condition were a gateway of personal opportunity. At some point, my wife and I would be leaving town for a life of our independent choosing. For Cheyenne and the many other African American citizens of small-town Virginia, the fight to earn a decent living would continue in our absence.

Throughout our tenure, we visited several churches in the area and discovered a remarkable divide between the Black Church and the white church. On one particular Sunday morning, we were stunned to hear a white preacher compare the actions of the Good Samaritan to a white man providing necessary charity to a black man. It was then that we looked around to discover there was not a black face in the crowd. Across town and nearer to the face of poverty, my wife and I spent a Sunday morning worshipping with an all black congregation. We were openly welcomed, but received curious stares. There, in the middle of Virginia, we encountered a most sacred and segregated hour of American life on both sides of the aisle.

For several years after we left, I simply never made a connection between the Black Church and the concerns of a struggling black community. One seemed easily independent of the other. It never occurred to me that there was a reason segregation had managed to survive in the church. That is, until the presidential campaign of 2008.

In March of 2007 thousands of eyes were glued to the confrontational interview between Sean Hannity of Fox News and the Reverend Jeremiah Wright of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago (an interview now widely available on YouTube). Senator Barack Obama, an emerging candidate for president, was a long time friend of Wright as well as a member of his church. Their relationship had even inspired Obama to write a New York Times bestseller called *The Audacity of Hope*. Clearly, Wright was caught off guard when Hannity began challenging the teachings of Black Liberation Theology for the first time on a national stage. Their conversation became rather awkward and unsettling for many of the same reasons that I opened with in this introduction. A white man was openly challenging a black man on matters of racial theology.

Diehard Republicans and curious liberals began spreading word that Obama was potentially in league with a racist cult from

Chicago. And as the year progressed, few thought that a man with questionable affiliations would surpass the Democratic popularity of Hillary Clinton as the nominee of his party. But when he won the Iowa caucus in January of 2008, all eyes turned back to the junior senator from Illinois. Within just a few weeks, he would have to publically address his views of Reverend Wright, the Black Church, and race relations in America.

Voters from California to New Hampshire soon became witness to a cycle of videos within which Wright was seen cursing America for its oppressive history. The voting electorate, including those who had already cast their ballots in Obama's favor, were beginning to wonder about the relationship between these two men. Popular news commentators like Bill O'Reilly of Fox News, Glenn Beck of CNN, and radioman Rush Limbaugh stirred up controversy on the subject, but I began to wonder if there was a valuable history getting lost in the shuffle of politics. Few analysts seemed willing or able to offer a balanced assessment of Wright's theology without using the subject as a partisan wedge.

For most of the summer before that historic November election, I managed to turn off the news and immerse myself in the study and research of Black Liberation Theology. I have written this book to share that research, but I have no illusions that my work will in any way cover all that needs to be said.



Anything But Civil

SOON AFTER the sun rose on the morning of April 15, 1865, Abraham Lincoln left a room of grown men in tears. Edwin Stanton, the Secretary of War, had been by his side through the night, and following Lincoln's dying breath, Stanton paused before rising to say what everyone in the room had already concluded: "Now he belongs to the Ages."¹ Sorrow seemed to engulf the country, regardless of locality. The bloodiest fighting in American history had taken such a toll on the Union and Confederate soldiers that few took any pleasure in the death of their president. Just six days earlier, a worn and muddy General Robert E. Lee had entered Appomattox Courthouse to stand before General Ulysses S. Grant and offer the full surrender of his Southern armies. Grant would recall their encounter with sadness:

I felt like anything rather than rejoicing at the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly, and had suffered so much for a cause, though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse. I do not question, however, the sincerity of the great mass of those who were opposed to us.²

The "cause" that Grant spoke of is frequently debated among historians, but generally accepted by modern Americans. Most

1. Bennett, *America*, 389.
2. Quoted in Bennett, *America*, 389.

2 THE SEGREGATED HOUR

believe that the Civil War was a war to end slavery. But slavery was not the primary cause for a war between the states. Shortly after the votes had been tallied in favor of President-elect Lincoln in November of 1860, prominent figures in South Carolina gathered together in a “secession convention,” where they agreed to remove their state from the Union by December 20. As other states followed, President Buchanan was “paralyzed” by the divisive actions of his countrymen.³ The limbo of a lame duck president allowed seven states to remove themselves from the *United States* of America before Lincoln arrived in Washington to do anything about it. Restoring the Union was, without question, Lincoln’s foremost objective in going to war.

President Lincoln saw the immoral nature of American slavery and wanted nothing more than to see it removed from the nation he loved, but he was a man of law. The new president knew that ending slavery would require the federal government to interfere with a constitutional privilege—the right of the states to govern themselves in the manner of their own choosing without the imposition of a higher body. Immorality was not sufficient grounds for ending slavery. Lincoln was incredibly cautious about setting any precedent for dictating moral behavior from the White House.

As Lincoln and the Union debated how best to restore the country, slaves were seen as a crutch to the Southern economy that, if emancipated, would create a ripple effect in the war. Rather than ending slavery based on moral outrage, the federal government did so as a strategic maneuver. They resolved to end slavery as a means for restoring the Union. “If the rebels did not stop fighting and return to the Union by January 1, 1863, the president would free ‘thenceforward and forever’ all slaves in the rebel states.”⁴

3. Bennett, *America*, 308.

4. Oates, *Malice toward None*, 319.

The end of slavery in rebel states, however, was not a forbidding of slavery everywhere. This would require congressional action—an amendment to the Constitution. Two years after Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation took effect, both the House of Representatives and the Senate approved legislation that would officially outlaw slavery in the whole of the United States. And on February 1, 1865, the president signed a “Joint Resolution submitting the proposed 13th Amendment to the states.”⁵

With just twenty-seven amendments passed in the history of the U.S., none has been more difficult to sell to the American people than the thirteenth. Members of Congress who pushed it through Washington channels had little opposition, and almost every opponent of abolition was now serving in the Confederacy, thus making Congress a mostly northern institution. But in order to pass, it still had to face the states.

The Congress . . . shall propose Amendments to this Constitution . . . which . . . shall be valid to all Intents and Purposes, as part of this Constitution, when ratified by the Legislatures of three fourths of the several States.⁶

More than 30 percent of the nation’s thirty-six states were officially aligned with the Confederacy, a body whose infrastructure demanded slavery as the basis of its economic success. Passing an amendment abolishing slavery everywhere would require a heavy hand of persuasion in the South by a federal government rooted in the philosophy of northern lawmakers. This was a tall order for a nation still at war.

For years slavery had been justified among southern divines (pastors and bishops) through an interpretation of Genesis 9 that assumed far more than the text would either literally or figuratively allow.

5. U.S. Constitution, amend. 13.

6. U.S. Constitution, art. 5.

4 THE SEGREGATED HOUR

And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without. And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father's nakedness. And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. And he said, "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren."⁷

Known today as racial prophecy, a belief was born among slave owners that this was a text separating white men from black men, making the latter more apt for labor and the former more fit to lead. Shem, in the text, was to become the "servant of servants" to his brothers and the generations that would follow. This is a tough passage to process for most Christians, regardless of any slave-based implications. But the separation of Ham from his brothers was a national divide rather than a racial one.

These are the families of the sons of Noah, after their generations, in their nations: and by these were the nations divided in the earth after the flood.⁸

Still, many of these southern "divines" would cite the Old Testament "to show that the Israelites, including Abraham and other favored patriarchs, held slaves without drawing God's censure. They cited the New Testament to demonstrate that neither Jesus nor the apostles ever preached against slavery and used the Noahic curse to provide a racial justification for the specific enslavement of blacks."⁹ The Reverend James A. Lyon of Columbus, Mississippi, himself a slave owner, declared from the pulpit, "As to the lawfulness of the institution slavery in itself considered,

7. Genesis 9:22–26. Note: All Scripture references are from the King James Version.

8. Gen 10:32.

9. Genovese, *Consuming Fire*, 4.

disconnected from its abuses, we scarcely deem it necessary to discuss it.”¹⁰ With the racial argument based on obscure passages in the Old Testament, the New Testament became sufficient grounds for demanding the obedience of a slave without his own individual right.

Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ.¹¹

Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God.¹²

Exhort servants to be obedient unto their own masters, and to please them well in all things; not answering again.¹³

To tamper with the traditionally Christian view on American slavery in the South was to negotiate a new balance between Scripture and the sacred rights of man embraced in the words of Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence:

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.

Christian slave owners faced a conflict of written authority. They believed firmly that Scripture was its own constitution between God and humankind but conceded that the founding documents were a purely human constitution. Much of Jefferson’s Declaration had been based on the political theory of

10. Quoted in Genovese, *Consuming Fire*, 59.

11. Ephesians 6:5.

12. Colossians 3:22.

13. Titus 2:9.

6 THE SEGREGATED HOUR

a late seventeenth century English philosopher, John Locke, who testified of this equality among men.

The state has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions.¹⁴

Even for a good student of Scripture, it can be difficult to reconcile Pauline scriptures that refer to this relationship between master and servant. Our social environment no longer includes any such categories. We have employers rather than masters. We have employees rather than servants. And in most cases, Americans work with one another of their own free will. Nonetheless, Lincoln and his administration were forced to make a decision about slavery for what they saw as the greater good of the nation. Since there was no explicit condemnation of slavery from Genesis to Revelation, this became the greatest challenge in selling the Thirteenth Amendment to southern divines and confederate spokesmen.

In his earliest years, Lincoln had witnessed the inhumane treatment of slaves and “brooded over their condition.” Sailing down the Ohio River with a friend during their early twenties, the future president witnessed “a coffle of twelve slaves on board, all chained together” like fish on a line. Lincoln’s observations of slavery during that trip would torment his heart and mind for years to come.¹⁵ But Lincoln was a man who respected the laws of his country. He knew that the Founders had set in place a very difficult path for change. The Constitution had been written for the purpose of restricting the federal government from meddling in the affairs of the states or altering laws at the whim of a presi-

14. Locke, *Second Treatise*, chap. 2, sec. 6.

15. Quoted in Oates, *Malice toward None*, 59–60.

dent. To end slavery in the United States of America would require crossing that boundary for the first time in his nation's history.

As Grant closed in on the vulnerable flank of Lee's army in April of 1865, Lincoln had already begun working to persuade the southern states to accept the Thirteenth Amendment as an appropriate means to an end. In between the surrender of Lee on April 9 and the president's death on April 15, two southern states, Tennessee and Arkansas, approved the amendment. Over the course of several months, more southern states would follow, but with great apprehension. It wasn't until the end of 1865, with the signature of Georgia, that this complicated amendment was officially ratified.

Of the deeply southern states that rejected the amendment, only Mississippi stood in defiance. Symbolic though it was, their disapproval set a tone for the future of southern reconstruction. Knowing that they made up an important part of the remaining quarter of states not required for ratification, Mississippi remained silent for almost 130 years, finally ratifying the abolition of slavery in 1995.¹⁶ An intentional refusal to accept the end of slavery was the backdrop upon which all of postwar Reconstruction would fall. While Mississippi verbally opposed a change, several other states only approved the amendment in order to gain postwar security under the federal government.

Before his death, Lincoln had been at odds with Congress over how to bring "rebellious states back into the fold." Understandably, many in Congress were concerned that a lenient return to the Union after so bloody a war would perpetuate the conflicts that divided the nation. Lincoln, however, proposed a Ten Percent Plan providing that "once 10 percent or more of the voting population of any occupied state had taken the oath [of allegiance to the Union], they were authorized to set up a loyal government." Not everyone had agreed with the president's proposal, but with Andrew Johnson suddenly at the helm of a

16. Silverman, *You Can't Air That*, 119.

new administration, the Thirteenth Amendment would become a tool for pressuring southern states to give up far more than they were prepared to concede. In order for members of the broken Confederacy to regain equal statehood with “full rights under the Constitution,” Johnson insisted that they approve the Thirteenth Amendment as a prerequisite for their redemption.¹⁷

With few exceptions, the end of slavery meant that southern state leaders had to find new ways of continuing their deeply held views. Each state reconvened a constitutional convention and discussed laws unto which they could continue in much the same way as they had before the war. If slavery was to be abolished amidst their collective disapproval, then it would have to be reborn under another name and another system. Racism would soon become the new institution of slavery through the introduction of Black Code legislation.

The codes were intended to “subject former slaves to a variety of special regulations and restrictions on their freedom.”¹⁸ Not surprisingly, in November of 1865, Mississippi enacted the most explicit of these codes.

Be it further enacted . . . that all freedmen, free negroes and mulattoes in this State, over the age of eighteen years, found on the second Monday in January, 1866, or thereafter, with no lawful employment or business, or found unlawfully assembling themselves together either in the day or night time . . . shall be fined in the sum of not exceeding, in the case of a freedman, free negro or mulatto, fifty dollars . . . and imprisoned at the discretion of the court.¹⁹

Essentially, if a black man was found with no work, he could be fined and imprisoned as though unemployment were

17. Divine, *America*, 453–55.

18. *Ibid.*, 455.

19. Quoted in Johnson, *American Past*, 3.

his crime. Under this and other Black Codes across the south, the black community was once again enslaved through labor laws.



For many Americans, it has become almost commonplace to disregard the challenges of modern racism by declaring that the Civil War brought an official end to slavery and thus gave black people every opportunity to be as free as anyone else. “Any failure to succeed is their own fault,” they say.

Certainly there is truth in expecting people from all walks of life to stand up for their own freedoms, but the Supreme Court had previously ruled that blacks were not to be considered citizens of the United States. Hence, the Thirteenth Amendment did not provide the necessary justice that the black community required. They could neither vote in elections nor have their testimony accepted in a court of law. With Black Codes now firmly in place among southern states, slavery by its new name had become just as bitter. And after enduring a war that brought an end to the former institution of slavery, the new conflict between black and white was *anything but civil*.

The First Movement for Civil Rights

AT A gathering in 1867 in New York City, Sojourner Truth, an American abolitionist who had been born into northern slavery, spoke on the post-war situation:

They have got their liberty—so much good luck to have slavery partly destroyed; not entirely. I want it[s] root and branch destroyed. Then we will all be free indeed.¹

Her argument was simple. Slavery had been abolished by Lincoln in an effort to crush the lifeline of the southern economy, but the foundation of American slavery had been built on the immoral belief that blacks were less than human. Deeply felt racism was the “root and branch” of American genocide. Those who believed their laboring slaves were merely objects to possess and not fellow humans could just as easily treat them like dogs or horses trained only to serve their masters. Blood had been spilt in an effort to restore the Union, but little blood had been spilt in favor of civil equality.

Two days after the March 4, 1857, inauguration of President James Buchanan, Chief Justice Roger Brooke Taney had declared a landmark ruling in the case of *Dred Scott v. Sanford*. Under the laws of Missouri, Dred Scott was a slave. When his master moved to the free state of Illinois, Scott believed it was his right to file suit against those who were continuing to enslave him. Justice Taney’s ruling, however, stole any hope that Scott and his family might

1. Quoted in Boyd, *Autobiography*, 144.

have held. In the words of historian William Bennett, the ruling was “truly breathtaking.”² When Taney read the verdict of the court, a pin could have dropped in the chamber without notice:

It is obvious that they [those of the enslaved African race] were not even in the minds of the framers of the Constitution when they were conferring special rights and privileges upon the citizens of a State in every other part of the Union. . . . Indeed, when we look to the conditions of this race in the several States at the time, it is impossible to believe that these rights and privileges were intended to be extended to them.

It is the opinion of the court that . . . neither Dred Scott himself, nor any of his family, were made free by being carried into this territory; even if they had been carried there by the owner, with the intention of becoming a permanent resident . . . it is the judgment of this court, that it appears by the record before us that [Dred Scott] is not a citizen of Missouri, in the sense in which that word is used in the Constitution.³

Justice Taney and the Supreme Court had determined that Scott had no rights in the United States of America because he was black. Thus, when slavery was ended by the Thirteenth Amendment, no one could pretend that blacks were equal. On the contrary, a man freed from slavery who had no citizenship was not free, nor was he equal.

Over the years that gave rise to the Civil War, many Americans had toyed with the concept of emigration, or simply, the notion of sending blacks back to Africa. The American Colonization Society, established more than a half a century before, had been created for the sole purpose of “providing a way to resettle free blacks outside the United States.”⁴ It was believed

2. Bennett, *America*, 293.

3. U.S. Reports, *Dred Scott v. John F. A. Sanford*, par. 55, 56, 193, 202.

4. Yarema, *American Colonization Society*, 3.

by members of the ACS, both white and black, that there could be no unity between the races. Equal citizenship, it was thought, would be a danger to society. No one could imagine the black community co-existing with white Americans who had once enslaved their people.

Still, the ACS did not gain widespread popularity.

Firebrand abolitionists insisted that the Society's propaganda, branding free blacks as inferior and incapable of citizenship, lowered rather than elevated blacks and served only to increase prejudice and hatred.⁵

The challenge of allowing black equality and the possibility of *African* American citizenship required members of Congress to address their conscious fears of an integrated society. No one could be sure how things would turn out, but congressional Reconstruction demanded more than just an amendment to end slavery. The very roots of racial discrimination had to be pulled. If the Founders meant to exclude slaves from their declaration of human equality, then their philosophy had to be seen as imperfect.

Within just five years of the Thirteenth's ratification, Congress passed the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments. The former provided "national citizenship" and equal rights for all persons born or naturalized on American soil. Under the Fourteenth Amendment, the federal government now had responsibility for ensuring the equal rights of all Americans, black or white. The Fifteenth Amendment took its predecessor just a step further, prohibiting "denial of franchise" because of race, color, or past servitude. In other words, no man could be denied the right to vote and thus lose his voice as a citizen of the United States.⁶

As both amendments began to pass through the ratification process, states and independent organizations were finding ways

5. *Ibid.*, viii.

6. Divine, *America*, 456–57.

around the federal system. If a black man was to be given his federal right to vote, then white men would take it upon themselves to make voting and citizen participation that much more difficult. And almost a century before the existence of Black Power, newly titled African Americans were preyed upon by the awful vanity of white power. None became more memorable in their actions than the Ku Klux Klan.

By intimidating black voters, the KKK was able to break the will and spirit of liberated citizens and keep them from finding a voice. In South Carolina, Elias Hill, a crippled black preacher from York County, was violently harassed for encouraging his congregants to stand up for themselves.

They came in a very rapid manner, and I could hardly tell whether it was the sound of horses or men. At last they came to my brother's door, which is in the same yard, and broke open the door and attacked his wife, and I heard her screaming and mourning. I could not understand what they said, for they were talking in an outlandish and unnatural tone, which I had heard they generally used at a negro's house. . . . She was crying and the Ku-Klux were whipping her to make her tell where I lived. . . . Then I knew they would take me, and I answered, "I am here." . . . They pointed pistols at me . . . as if they were going to shoot me, telling me they were going to kill me.⁷

To the west of York County, Harriet Hernandez testified of the violence that she and her daughter had endured while her husband was out of the house.

They came in; I was lying in bed. . . . They took me out of bed; they would not let me get out, but they took me up in their arms and toted me out—me and my daughter Lucy. He struck me on the forehead with a pistol . . . he kicked

7. U.S. Congress, *Report*, Vol. 1.

me over when I went to get over; and then he went on to a brush pile, and they laid us right down there, both together. They laid us down twenty yards apart, I reckon. They had dragged and beat us along. They struck me right on top of my head, and I thought they had killed me.

When asked how many other black citizens in her neighborhood faced the same violence, Hernandez replied, "It is all of them, might near."⁸

By 1875 the problems in Mississippi were such that Governor Adelbert Ames hoped to obtain assistance from President Grant.

The "white liners" have gained their point – they have, by killing and wounding, so intimidated the poor Negroes that they can in all human probability prevail over them at the election. I shall at once try to get troops from the general government.⁹

The federal government certainly played a part in trying to suppress the violence, but by 1877, its efforts had ended and the constitutional amendments were no longer being enforced. Where the Thirteenth Amendment had ended slavery, white power mandated black labor. Where the Fourteenth Amendment had given citizenship to African Americans, white power lessened the potential for equality. And where the Fifteenth Amendment had given voting rights to all men regardless of color, white power crushed the voices of the black community for almost a century.

By the turn of the century, public segregation had been fully realized through the widely familiar "separate but equal" ruling of the Supreme Court known as *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

If one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot put them upon the same

8. U.S. Congress, *Report*, Vol. 5.

9. Perman, *Civil War and Reconstruction*, 387.

plane. . . [Even] the question of the proportion of colored blood necessary to constitute a colored person, as distinguished from a white person . . . these are questions to be determined under the laws of each state.¹⁰



With the end of Reconstruction came an end of government intervention on behalf of the black community. Without a continued hand of protection, years of uncontested violence opened the door to a new age of poverty. And while there have always been poor men of every race and nationality, the dominant face of poverty in America began to have just one face. The first movement for civil rights had failed.

10. U.S. Reports, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, par. 25–26.

Poor Man Out

BY WAR'S end, Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love, had long become a beacon of hope and opportunity for those in the black community. Thousands upon thousands of former slaves, now freedmen, were missing brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters. Their search was recorded in the *Christian Recorder*, a weekly newspaper representing the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). Below are just a few examples of "advertisements" for lost family members.

September 22, 1866

Information Wanted

Information wanted of the whereabouts of my husband, Richard Jones, and my two sons, John and Thomas. We were separated in the woods, near a place called Alleywhite, in November, 1862. I was carried back to Suffolk by the Union troops. I have heard nothing of them since. We were owned by Birven Jones, of Smithfield, Suffolk County, Virginia. I am the granddaughter of old Tom Peet Wilson. I am much in want at this time.

May 8, 1869

Information Wanted

Information wanted of my son Charles Blackwell. He was sold from me in Lancaster County, Virginia, ten years ago, when quite young. He was sold from the estate of Mr. Joseph Beacham to Mr. Lewis Dix, and

then taken to Mississippi. I am an old man and need the companionship of my son. Any assistance in securing information of his whereabouts will be thankfully received. Ministers in Mississippi and throughout the entire country will please read in their churches.

April 2, 1870

Information Wanted

Information wanted of Sarah Williams, who I left at Halifax Court House, VA, about 25 years ago. She belonged to a man whose name was William Early, who kept a dry-goods store. Any information of her will be thankfully received by her sister, Martha Ann Good, who was taken away from Nathan Dexter, who kept a hotel at Halifax, at 12 o'clock at night, when quite small, and sold in Alabama, but who now lives at 225 Currant Alley, Philadelphia, PA. Ministers in the South, please read in your churches.¹

Henry McNeal Turner, who had recruited blacks to serve in the Union army, was an optimistic military chaplain who could envision the end of discrimination. He believed, like many during the war, in the vision of Abraham Lincoln toward a more perfect Union. However, after Lincoln's assassination, the rise of white power, and the eventual failure of Reconstruction by 1877, Turner emerged as an AME spokesman for emigration and black nationalism.² His views were not held by everyone, but there was an ever-increasing need to resolve the race issue in America. More importantly, those at the bottom of the economic totem pole—those with no money, no family, and no education—were in need of someone to care for their plight.

From its very inception, the AME church quickly became an institutional organization devoted to helping those who couldn't help themselves. When the black community needed support,

1. Quoted in Johnson, *American Past*, 7–10.

2. Divine, *America*, 477–78.

they learned to lean on the shoulder of the Black Church. For too many years, members of the AME had witnessed the application of false doctrine to promote a biblical defense of slavery. As a result, their handling of Scripture became less about proving what they believed and more about living what they knew. Long before it was ever written down, they developed a theology of service based on social responsibility.



By the end of the Civil War, the economic structure of the South had been almost entirely transformed. Nearly 40 percent of the cotton crop that had once been the apex of southern prosperity was now being grown west of the Mississippi. The rapidly progressing industrial revolution moved the postwar South into a “classic pattern of underdevelopment” that affected the lives of black and white Americans alike.³ No assessment of radical Reconstruction would be complete without, at least, a partial acknowledgment that economic hardship was colorblind. Nonetheless, blacks were suffering from “dire poverty, and the old [white] ruling class remained largely intact.” The result was an unshakable image of worthless blacks and superior whites.⁴

Success for an African American required a much steeper climb than the average citizen. With the public at large disregarding their potential at every turn, any achievement became heroic. For example, Hiram Rhodes Revels became the first black senator, filling a seat left vacant by the former president of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis. Then there was P.B.S. Pinchback, who served briefly as the first black governor of Louisiana. And after the turn of the century, Jack Johnson defeated Tommy Burns, to become the first black heavyweight champion in the sport of professional boxing.⁵ These accomplishments proved

3. Foner, *Short History*, 169.

4. *Ibid.*, 179.

5. AfricanAmericans.com, “African American Firsts.”

that nothing was impossible in the black community, but they failed to remove the impressions of the majority who saw blacks as collectively inferior.

As Revels, Pinchback, and Johnson were carving out a name for themselves in a predominantly white society, the vast majority of blacks were coming of age with little or no identity. By the 1890s, the rate of sickness among African Americans was 20 percent higher than it had been on the plantations. Many were being squeezed out of crafts and industries where they had once been successful under slavery. With the changing face of technology and the low rate of education among blacks, their plunge toward inevitable poverty became ever more obvious.⁶ Even with prominent teachers like Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois working in segregated universities, the likelihood that a black child would achieve anything resembling an American Dream was far less than that of his or her white counterpart. This was not for lack of desire but for lack of support. “Separate but equal” had proven almost immediately that there was no such thing.



Contemporary Americans may wonder why the poor and disadvantaged citizens of their country do not simply rise up from their own ashes and find a way to succeed.

Surely, they say, it cannot fall on the rest of society to be responsible for what a few minor citizens failed to achieve. Some have called this a “social Darwinism” akin to Herbert Spencer’s *survival of the fittest*: the belief that human survival does not depend on the assistance of others but, rather, is our own responsibility. Such conditional affection toward the poor is, perhaps, the most ignorant of all reasons to refuse lending a hand. Under this school of thought, people are far more inclined to help the rich who lose their wealth than the poor who never had it.

6. Fogel and Engerman, *Time on the Cross*, 261.

The period of post-Reconstruction signaled a philosophical and economic split between the struggles of the white community and the disproportional weight of poverty in the black community. While there were always exceptions to the rule, poor African Americans were left to fend for themselves at a time when they most needed the compassion of their countrymen. But a movement was coming and they knew it was only a matter of time.

Depression of the Darker Brother

AFTER THE case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, almost thirty years passed in which the violence-prone Klan became relatively mild. Issues popped up from year to year, but it wasn't until after the First World War that an influx of Jews and Catholics on American soil stirred a "reincarnation of the KKK." By its own measure, there were nine million members in 1924 alone.¹ If their count was even remotely accurate, there were almost as many members in the Klan as there were African Americans in the country.² It takes little imagination to consider the racial tension that existed during the Roaring Twenties.

When the stock market crashed in 1929, depression emptied the pockets of middle and upper class Americans but created an "architecture of despair" among the poorer African American community. Many had "been at the bottom so long that it might have seemed that nothing could possibly get worse." Participants in the Great Migration, the departure of half a million blacks from the rural South during World War I, were now the heaviest hit victims of the Great Depression.³

Before he was elected to the United States House of Representatives in 1945, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. was a member of the inner-city Harlem community. The City of New York had no public welfare system to help residents deal with the problems cre-

1. Watkins, *Great Depression*, 33.
2. U.S. Census Bureau, "Race and Hispanic Origin."
3. Watkins, *Great Depression*, 71.

ated by the Depression. Recognizing the needs in his community, Powell organized a relief program headquartered in Abyssinian Baptist Church, thus continuing the ideal that a church existed to serve its community.⁴ He later wrote of the circumstances that had led to the shortage of official services in Harlem:

Harlem was a community that had been built to house about eighty thousand whites, mostly German and Irish. Within one decade it became the world's largest racial ghetto because three hundred thousand Negro people from the South and the Caribbean had poured into it. Despite the fact that Harlem had quadrupled its population, not a single new school or hospital had been built in the district; and to aggravate matters, the private hospitals in the Harlem area refused to accept Negro patients. And so, in this compact area, three hundred thousand Negro people were forced to live, serviced by institutions created for only eighty thousand.⁵

Under the watch of President Franklin Roosevelt, a great many programs were enacted to stimulate the economy and restore the basic freedoms of everyday Americans. The KKK had fallen in popularity after the Depression, but they continued to march, burn crosses, and engage in the lynching of African Americans. Even though the president's domestic agenda had been incredibly popular across the country, any effort by lawmakers to bring forward an anti-lynching bill uncovered the heartless prejudice that still existed in Congress.

Hoping to avoid even the slightest discussion, Senator Ellender of Louisiana implored his fellow senators to "at all cost preserve the white supremacy of America."⁶ In the face of great

4. Boyd, *Autobiography*, 285.

5. Powell, *Adam by Adam*, 61–62.

6. Watkins, *Great Depression*, 323.

animosity in the South, no anti-lynching bill ever passed through Congress. And the violence continued.

By the 1940s several new spokesmen had begun to lecture the black community about their responsibility to take back the freedoms that had been stolen by the white community. Among them was A. Philip Randolph. Speaking from Detroit in 1942, he pressed his audience to fight for their God-given rights through whatever means were necessary.

Slavery was not abolished because it was bad and unjust. It was abolished because men fought, bled and died on the battlefield. Therefore, if Negroes secure their goals, immediate and remote, they must win them and to win them they must fight, sacrifice, suffer, go to jail and, if need be, die for them. These rights will not be given. They must be taken.⁷

Randolph introduced a daunting and overlooked truth. Slavery was not itself removed from America because of its immorality. Neither the federal government nor the American people had ever cooperated for the purpose of bringing an end to human bondage. In other words, there had never been a collective recognition of slavery's stain on the canvas of American history. And in the absence of that recognition, blood had still been shed and lives had still been lost. He continued:

As to the composition of our movement. Our policy is that it be all-Negro, and pro-Negro, but not anti-white, or anti-Semitic or anti-labor, or anti-Catholic. The reason for this policy is that all oppressed people must assume the responsibility and take the initiative to free themselves.⁸

7. Quoted in Boyd, *Autobiography*, 310.

8. *Ibid.*, 311.

Randolph was not looking for a reversal of power. His objective was not to destroy the majority but to equalize the rights of the minority. Randolph insisted that the black community had a “moral obligation to demand the right to enjoy and make use of [our] civil and political privileges.” He ended the speech by saying:

If we don't, we will lose the will to fight for our citizenship rights, and the public will consider that we don't want them and should not have them. This fight to break down these barriers in every city should be carefully and painstakingly organized. By fighting for these civil rights the Negro masses will be disciplined in struggle.⁹

For the first time in years, it seemed there were men and women in the black community who were prepared to rise up in a disciplined fight for their civil rights. Some might argue that the rest of the nation had it coming.



The most eloquent interpretation of this period came from the hand of an African American poet named Langston Hughes. In his poem “I, Too,” Hughes speaks of “the darker brother” who finds himself sent to the kitchen “when company comes.” The darker brother is not asked whether he would prefer the kitchen or the table, but is expected to steer clear of any guests who might see him. While in the kitchen, he laughs, eats, and grows strong for a coming day when he will make his way to the table with or without an invitation.

The civil rights movement did not start because white Americans believed they were being unjust. It began when the black community found the strength to fight for their right to an equal seat at the table.

9. *Ibid.*, 312.

Malcolm and Martin

AFTER YEARS of being in the back of the bus, when it was clear that at least some African Americans were ready to take action, two key men emerged with a resolve that could not have been more different. One, Malcolm X, believed in taking rights by force if and when the situation called for it. Whites, in his eyes, had been permitted to bear arms against blacks without reprimand (lynchings, burnings, shootings), so it only followed that in America, all blacks had a right, nay, a responsibility, to protect themselves against those who wished them harm. The other, Martin Luther King Jr., had matured in a world of theology, where peaceful solutions were a far more appropriate means to the same end. He reveled in the study of Henry David Thoreau and what he saw as a fitting call for the times: civil disobedience.

To understand Malcolm and Martin without bias, readers must set aside any individual preference for violent or non-violent problem-solving techniques. If someone illegally enters your home, do you reach for a gun or a phone? Some of us are more prone to violence than others. Some of us hold our anger deep within until rage consumes our otherwise peaceful exterior. The point is, all of us are torn between peace and war. The closer an enemy gets to the home of a peaceful individual, the more he or she may consider options that would never have been imaginable otherwise. In other words, a fair rendering of Malcolm and Martin requires realism and sensitivity.

In an effort to capture the widespread anger of his times, Malcolm wrote:

The black man in North America was economically sick and that was evident in one simple fact: as a consumer, he got less than his share, and as a producer gave least. The black American today shows us the perfect parasite image—the black tick under the delusion that he is progressing because he rides on the udder of the fat, three-stomached cow that is white America.¹

Ossie Davis, writing sometime after the death of Malcolm X, elevated the message with even harsher, more explicit terms.

White folks do not need anybody to remind them that they are men. We do! This was his [Malcolm's] one incontrovertible benefit to his people. Protocol and common sense require that Negroes stand back and let the white man speak up for us, defend us, and lead us from behind the scene in our fight. But Malcolm said . . . Get up off your knees and fight your own battles. That's the way to win back your self-respect. He knew that every Negro who did not challenge on the spot every instance of racism, overt or covert, committed against him and his people, who chose instead to swallow his spit and go on smiling, was an Uncle Tom and a traitor, without . . . commonly accepted aspects of manhood.²

The lower people get on the social totem pole, the more they are oppressed by the weight of those above. Blacks were being told of their rights by whites who frequently hindered their liberties with a burning cross, a noose, or a pattern of slanderous threats. The federal government had long ago washed its hands of any responsibility for the well-being of its black citizenry. As a result, they were fed to the wolves of white supremacy and left to

1. Haley and Malcolm X, *Malcolm X*, 361.

2. Quoted in Haley and Malcolm, *Malcolm X*, 524–25.

fend for themselves, without a vocal warrior to remind them that they were full-fledged human beings with a will, with strength, and with the power to defend themselves. Furthermore, if whites were free to make threats against blacks, should blacks avoid a pre-emptive strike, even when whites had proven they were willing to act on their word? Under what ludicrous doctrine was one man able to beat his fellow man to a bloody pulp while that beaten man was denied the right to rise up and reciprocate? Naturally, these were not questions becoming a peaceful man. They were questions becoming a man of war.

Malcolm X was among those who were angered by oppression, and thus, his words became a battle cry for many in the black community.

There's only one way to be independent. There's only one way to be free. It's not something someone gives to you. It's something that you take. Nobody can give you independence. Nobody can give you freedom. Nobody can give you equality or justice or anything. If you're a man, you take it. If you can't take it, you don't deserve it. Nobody can give it to you . . . Freedom comes to us either by ballots or by bullets.³

However harsh his words may have been, it is difficult to condemn them without also condemning the American Founders and their revolutionary resistance to British oppression. Blood was shed to force the issue of freedom. And in every case where people have been enslaved, whether physically or politically, violent revolution has been a natural and understandable progression. In many cases around the world, revolutionary efforts have not always provided people with the freedom they originally sought, but the fight goes on until the war has been exhausted and a truce can be established. This was Malcolm X: a man of war making efforts to build up an ideological army.

3. Boyd, *Autobiography*, 405.

His philosophical antithesis was King, who is still questioned by some in the black community for his commitment to words more than action.

We must not return violence under any condition. I know this is difficult advice to follow. . . . But this is the way of Christ; it is the way of the cross. We must somehow believe that unearned suffering is redemptive . . . We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering.⁴

Speaking to a gathering of students in California, King used a message about *agape* love, as found in the Greek New Testament, to teach what he believed was an appropriate response to racial brutality in America:

Biblical theologians would say it [agape] is the love of God working in the minds of men. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. And when you come to love on this level you begin to love men not because they are likable, not because they do things that attract us, but because God loves them and here we love the person who does the evil deed while hating the deed that the person does.⁵

Peace-loving people of faith have often looked at this gentle approach and thought kindly of King. His life, for many people today, has become the legendary embodiment of peace for race relations in America. Most remembered for his “I Have a Dream” speech, Martin was a visionary orator who offered few practical suggestions for solving the kind of anger that still existed among men like Malcolm X. As King preached of an enduring patience, Malcolm insisted that patience had long been exhausted. Although both men wanted to achieve the same ends, they had begun with different theological roots.

4. Quoted in Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 58.

5. King, “Power,” 31–32.

While enduring prison time, Malcolm X—born Malcolm Little—found his own version of “messiah” through the teachings of men like W. D. Fard and Elijah Muhammed, who he eventually came to believe were messengers “to the black people of North America.”⁶ His entire autobiographical chapter on salvation was a report on self-redemption through the Nation of Islam.

The Nation of Islam, anathema to the rest of the Muslim world, was founded in 1930 by a man of no consequence from Detroit whose followers eventually crowned him their incarnate god and declared that “white people are inherently evil.” The Nation even went so far as to say that there was “no life after death,” which flew in the face of the Islamic faith.⁷ Malcolm was indoctrinated by the foremost leader of the Nation, Elijah Muhammed, and thus had little patience for the white community—even when they agreed with him on past and present injustices. He became “the national spokesperson” for the group and was a “symbol of young blacks’ rage against white America’s racism and also against middle-class blacks who [had] forgotten the plight of their poor brothers and sisters left behind in the ghetto.”⁸

On the other side of the aisle was the biblical theology of King. He had learned much from the politics of the past but based his vision of hope on Christian cooperation and learned tolerance for those who do not look or act like everyone else. King believed in a future where “right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.”⁹ Asked about how long it would take to achieve his dream, he replied, “Not long, ‘cause mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the

6. Haley and Malcolm X, *Malcolm X*, 218.

7. Armstrong, *Islam*, 150.

8. Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 98.

9. Washington, *I Have a Dream*, 105.

Lord, trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. . . . His truth is marching on.”¹⁰

When forced to address the rising views of Malcolm X, King responded from a jail in Birmingham. His condemnation of their “bitterness and hatred” suggested that “black nationalism” was a fruitless endeavor of men who had lost their faith in anything good.

This movement is nourished by the contemporary frustration over the continued existence of racial discrimination. It is made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is an incurable devil.¹¹

King saw himself as standing “in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community,” but he wasn’t exactly in the middle. The fact that Malcolm had militarized his position meant that Martin had to de-militarize his own. And while the two men continued to take turns on the political stage in their movement for civil rights, a similar pot was bubbling in Washington over whether to wage a war against poverty in America and cure the long-term effects of slavery, discrimination, and racial hatred in the black community. Poverty, as it turned out, was a far more complex problem than the color of a man’s skin. And while the impending birth of Black Liberation Theology would be rooted in salvation for the downtrodden poor, the debate wasn’t quite so black and white.

10. *Ibid.*, 124.

11. King, “Letter,” 93.

The War on Poverty

IN ALMOST every dialogue regarding poverty, Americans face a strange paradox of speaking for those whose experience they have never shared. While many enter the discussion believing that poverty is the ultimate consequence of a lazy population, few intellectuals have ever been utterly reduced to an inadequate standard of living. Indeed, there are always those who choose to live in poverty out of rebellion or self pity, but their actions cast a shadow on the less prominent faces of those who suffer from involuntary poverty. This point, apart from race, deserves a good deal of our attention.

The many complications of poverty have not and never will be summarily defined as problems confined to the black community or resulting entirely from racial victimization. On the contrary, poverty must be understood for what it is: *any* human existence without the means to pursue one's own happiness. Such an existence can, by all means, be chosen. But more often than not, poverty is generated by gradual or sudden misfortunes, ranging from the unfortunate loss of work to unexpected illness, disabilities, or even old age. Since the late twentieth century, Americans have gradually come to believe that the poor in their communities are on a path of voluntary self-expression, as though poverty was and is the life that all poor choose in order to make a grand illustration on the social landscape. Richard Wagner, Harris Professor of Economics at George Mason University, once wrote:

The distinction between involuntary poverty by chance and voluntary poverty through choice is simpler to make conceptually than it is to perceive empirically. Poverty is generally a mixture of choice and chance, with that mixture varying from case to case.¹

He continued:

It might seem reasonable that [public] policy should seek to aid cases where poverty is the result of chance, while refraining from aiding cases where poverty is the result of choice. The trouble with this prescription is that it cannot be implemented without knowledge of souls and minds. Nature does not generate birthmarks or other signals that allow such categorization. . . . The receipt of aid by those who are poor through choice will encourage more such choices. But to withhold aid to prevent such outcomes will imperil those who are poor through chance.²

Wagner was arguing that, although in theory one could be against helping those who haven't helped themselves, practically speaking, no one can truly know the heart and soul of the person whose poverty they so quickly condemn as voluntary. To avoid help for one is to avoid help for all on the basis of an unconfirmed and ignorant assumption.

As the fire of the civil rights movement was burning, conservatives and liberals entered a complex debate over the issue of poverty in America. Barry Goldwater, an Arizona Senator, made the political case in *The Conscience of a Conservative*:

How easy is it to reach the voters with earnest opportunities for helping the needy? And how difficult for Conservatives to resist these demands without appearing to be callous and contemptuous of the plight of less

1. Wagner, *American Conservatism*, 670.

2. *Ibid.*, 671.

fortunate citizens. “Have you no sense of social obligation?” the Liberals ask.³

More than anything, Goldwater was standing up against the idea of federal welfare programs that, he believed, “promote the idea that the government owes the benefits it confers on the individual, and that the individual is entitled, by right, to receive them.”⁴ Believing he was right to suggest excessive government intervention might produce more harm than good, a growing block of newly impassioned conservatives began seeing any mention of welfare, whether on the federal or local level, as an almost sinful concept. The unintended consequence of the *Goldwater Conscience* was that Republicans were quickly painted with an accusatory brush of elitism. It didn’t matter that there were conservatives working in every public sector of social service.

In the absence of any visible compassion, another voice emerged. Just two years later, Michael Harrington, whose writing of *The Other America* would soon inspire Lyndon Johnson to begin a War on Poverty in 1964, helped to paint the picture of “social blindness” in the conservative mind.

Here is the most familiar version of social blindness: “The poor are that way because they are afraid to work. . . . If they were like me (or my father or my grandfather), they could pay their own way. But they prefer to live on the dole and cheat the taxpayers.”⁵

His condemnation of the *Goldwater Conscience* is striking:

Those who could make the difference too often refuse to act because of their ignorant, smug moralisms. They view the effects of poverty—above all, the warping

3. Goldwater, *Conscience*, 57.

4. *Ibid.*, 59.

5. Harrington, *Other America*, 14.

of the will and spirit that is a consequence of being poor—as choices.⁶

Regardless of his socialized and atheistic tendencies, it was difficult for Conservatives to argue with Harrington's point: pursuit of the American dream among educated and working class Americans in a post-war society had created "a new kind of blindness about poverty."⁷

For the most part, the only poverty that middle and upper class citizens would admit to witnessing was that of a chosen departure from the norm. Like Christopher McCandless, who left the affluent suburbs of Washington to go "Into the Wild" and live without money by choice, successful Americans were beginning to see poverty through the lens of their sons and daughters who wandered into such a lifestyle as a means for adventure. In the case of McCandless, he believed that an affluent society was imprisoned by its own wealth and that wealth, into which he was born, was the root of all evil.⁸ Many of America's children who disappeared into the world of poverty by choice were basing their decision on the same message that thousands of preachers have made clear in their pulpits: money can pollute the mind and divert the community from its spiritual responsibility.

Nevertheless, while some members of American society were choosing to live a life of poverty as a sign of rebellion, Harrington brought to life some of the unpopular yet far more widespread forms, such as case poverty and insular poverty.

Case poverty is the plight of those who suffer from some physical or mental disability that is personal and individual and excludes them from the general advance. Insular poverty exists in areas like the Appalachians or

6. *Ibid.*, 15–16.

7. *Ibid.*, 4.

8. Penn, *Into the Wild*.

the West Virginia coal fields, where an entire section of the country becomes economically obsolete.⁹

But the problem of poverty, according to Harrington, didn't stop with these two forms. Unemployment, desperation, and old age were among the many factors he identified in *The Other America*.

It is bad enough for a worker to be laid off for a matter of weeks. When this becomes months, or even years, it is not simply a setback. It is a basic threat to fundamental living standards, a menace to impoverishment. . . . In short, the simple prescription of the comfortable middle-class citizen, "I can't see why those people don't just move, but I guess they're lazy," is spoken out of profound ignorance. There are many reasons why they can't move; and in many cases it wouldn't make a difference if they did. These are not people [who] are subject to a temporary, cyclical kind of joblessness. They are more often the ones who have had their very function in the economy obliterated.¹⁰

A great number of human beings are required for a brief period to do work that is too delicate for machines and too dirty for any but the dispossessed. So the Southern Negroes, the Texas-Mexicans, and the California Anglos are packed like cattle into trucks and make their pilgrimage of misery . . . [but not before they] sell themselves in the marketplace. The various hiring men chant out piece-work prices or hourly rates.¹¹

Many states report that half their citizens over 65 have incomes too low to meet their basic needs . . . Over half of these people are covered by some kind of Federal program (social security, old-age assistance, and so on). Yet, the social security payments are, by Federal admis-

9. Harrington, *Other America*, 11.

10. *Ibid.*, 32, 34.

11. *Ibid.*, 40, 50.

sion, completely inadequate to a decent life. . . . The lonely aged poor are . . . the most impoverished single group in the subculture of poverty. . . . We have, as the Senate Committee well described it, a “storage bin” philosophy in America. We “maintain” the aged; we give them the gift of life, but we take away the possibility of dignity.¹²

Greatly ignored in the culture of poverty were the children who, whether their parents were poor by choice or chance, had become the most vulnerable. The “ghetto,” in which so many children were being raised, was characterized by an “immoral maldistribution of wealth, high levels of unemployment, dilapidated housing, decrepit schools, inadequate health care, unavailable child care, and shattered familial and communal bonds.”¹³ Children forced to live in this environment “don’t know of light beyond the tunnel of this darkness—they don’t grow and they get stuck in this type of mentality.”¹⁴ Death in this world was becoming, ironically, a part of *life* for children who couldn’t even begin to focus on education or the future. LeAlan Jones, a teenager from the South Side of Chicago would testify several years later of walking into a worn-down tenement building where five-year-old Eric Morse had been thrown from a fourteenth-floor window by two other children who taunted him for refusing to participate in a criminal theft.

No one around them appreciates life, so why should they? Look at the building—you walk in and it smells like urine, you walk up the stairs and it’s dark, broken lights. When you live in filth, your mind takes in filth and you feel nothing. . . . These kids don’t have the right ingredients to be good kids. . . . It’s like you’re in this

12. Ibid., 104–5, 108, 119.

13. Jones and Newman, *Our America*, 11.

14. Ibid., 95.

maze, and you either die in it or you escape. . . . I live here not because I chose to, but because I have to.¹⁵

By the time President Johnson had begun his domestic war, poverty was proving to be more than the absence of money or the inability to support oneself. It was an entire sub-culture that chewed on human life like quicksand. There was no way to draw the line between chosen poverty and involuntary poverty. Hence, when Harrington introduced an educated and comfortable America to the *other* America, the federal government, under liberal leadership, took the message as an opportunity to make a case for their political War on Poverty.

As Goldwater predicted, it wouldn't be a hard sell to the easily broken hearts of a reflective American public who were beginning to feel pressed by leaders of the civil rights movement to address the guilt of racial discrimination, segregation, and slavery. In a sense, one might argue that "white America" wanted to make amends with "black America" and thus gave it their best shot through the War on Poverty. After all, the most familiar face of poverty was predominantly, though not exclusively, black.



Sorrow filled the nation on November 22, 1963, when the first of several infamous assassinations took the life of President John F. Kennedy. In the wake of his death, as with 9/11 four decades later, it would have been seen as unpatriotic and unsympathetic to come out against the new president and his sobering State of the Union address the following January. It was in that address, however, that President Lyndon Johnson introduced the War on Poverty and began a "creative federalism" in which the federal government would gradually disregard states and their governors in order to eradicate poverty at the local level.¹⁶ Many were sympathetic to the cause, but most were ignorant of the prece-

15. *Ibid.*, 97, 145, 159, 200.

16. Davidson, "War on Poverty," 2.

dent that Johnson was setting. If, in fact, he were to be successful in rooting out poverty through the means he was attempting to use, state governments would soon become nothing more than a nuisance and a hindrance to the greater good.

The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) was created to be the administrative leg of the War on Poverty. The agency quickly began passing over the states to fund and strengthen local communities, in spite of opposition from state leaders like California governor and future president Ronald Reagan.⁸ Likely unaware of the changes they were making to a constitutional precedent, local officials became “wary of state involvement,” seeing it as an unnecessary third party to their benevolent federal-local relationship.¹⁷

Nonetheless, these Community Action Agencies (CAA) that operated in conjunction with the federal government had little success. Ideas were always being proposed as a cure for the disease of poverty, but there were either too many or too few locals involved to be productive. Not to mention the fact that the greatest ingenuity was lost when men and women tried to implement their own concepts without cooperation. The OEO had been established to coordinate the War on Poverty, but the office was organizing more programs than it could possibly execute.¹⁸

In the latter months of 1966, Vice President Hubert Humphrey continued to make a case to the American people for fighting the president’s domestic war. “A balanced attack on poverty must provide at least four somewhat distinct remedies: job creation, job preparation, transfer payments, and equal employment opportunity.”¹⁹

Born in 1911 to the agricultural industry of South Dakota and raised to adulthood against the backdrop of the Great Depression, Humphrey knew first hand what it was to be out of

17. *Ibid.*, 5.

18. Sundquist, “Co-ordinating the War on Poverty,” 41.

19. Humphrey, “War on Poverty,” 8.

work and without a home.²⁰ But even a casual observer of his four “remedies” could see that the Humphrey cure for poverty was primarily based on finding work for the unemployed, without concern for the culture that poverty had created. He was a well-spoken man of ideas, but neither Johnson nor his vice president could have been expected to usher in a perfect program. And in the absence of perfection, the followers of Martin and Malcolm soon found themselves vying for Black Power on the local level.

20. Senate Historical Office, “Hubert H. Humphrey,” par. 6.

The Fight for Black Power

THIRTEEN WOUNDS from a sawed-off shotgun took the life of Malcolm X on February 21, 1965.¹ Few churches in Harlem were willing to facilitate a funeral service on his behalf for fear of violent recourse. When Bishop Childs of the Faith Temple made his church available through a complicated “humanitarian gesture,” both he and his wife were tormented with bomb threats.

Coming to the bishop’s defense, the Federation of Independent Political Action (FIPA) threatened every business in the city. Jesse Gray, spokesman for FIPA, had an organized plan to “picket all Harlem business establishments which would not close” on behalf of the service “in tribute to Malcolm X.”² Understandably, tensions rose in the black community, but FIPA became a powerful example of well-organized black action committees on the local level.

The previous year, President Johnson had signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, thus bringing an official end to segregation in every school and public place. Prior to such legislation, upper and middle class blacks were treated just as poorly as lower class blacks who had no education and no money. Segregated facilities gave the public image that all blacks, regardless of education or skill, were still among the bottom-feeders of American society. But now, with integration well underway, it became obvious that the ultimate beneficiaries of the civil rights movement were

1. Haley and Malcolm X, *Malcolm X*, 505.

2. *Ibid.*, 508, 510.

“middle-class blacks—blacks who had competitive resources such as steady incomes, education and special talents.”³

As the upper echelon of the black community was finally able to step back and realize their own unlimited potential for success, a new question arose. “Should we, as a community, seek out our own happiness or continue the fight for civil rights as they remain nonexistent for the impoverished of society?” Some, to be sure, went their own way. Others, moved by the leadership of Malcolm and Martin, focused their attention on trying to solve the problem of inner city poverty.

The Office of Economic Opportunity, waging its own War on Poverty, established Community Action Programs (CAPs) in each major locality to be “developed, conducted, and administered with the maximum feasible participation of residents of the areas and members of the groups served.” Communities were now integrating more than their facilities. They were being told to integrate their ideas. And with freedom to exercise their civil rights, black leaders began fighting for control of their local CAPs. What was intended to be an effort of racial cooperation turned into a battleground for Black Power. White officials from each locality were sensing the ‘potential threat to their authority’ by the conflicts that were happening right in front of them.⁴

Integration of water fountains, restaurants, and restrooms was quite different from forcing blacks and whites to work together on solutions for the inner city. What might seem easy enough in retrospect was much more complicated at the time. In many communities, officials and legislators had “long-standing commitments to local industry to maintain a large supply of surplus, unskilled labor.”⁵ Any solutions to poverty that might lower the supply of unskilled labor were a threat to the *status quo*. Hence, one of the key problems on the local level was that

3. Wilson, *Truly Disadvantaged*, 125.

4. Davidson, “War on Poverty,” 7.

5. Wheeler, “Civil Rights Groups,” 155.

white officials talked of compassion but did little to rock the boat. And the black community took notice.

The Black power movement and the anti-poverty program shared the same social space and developed a complex interactive relationship. Their association in time and social location led some observers to argue that a causal relationship existed, i.e., that the War on Poverty in some way caused the growth of the Black power movement and its increasing militancy.⁶

The conflict between moderate civil rights organizations and militant Black power groups was nurtured in the struggles for CAP control.⁷

Black Power was an ideology born out of self-preservation as well as a defense of the inner city. But those who aligned themselves to such thinking were being linked to the teachings of Malcolm X and his controversial slander of white America. They saw their most vulnerable communities being excluded from the great hope of an American dream and therefore made themselves the vocal heroes of a weaker population. American poverty soon evolved into a primarily black issue resting on the hope of black solutions.

Where the civil rights movement had pushed for integration and assimilation, Black Power was now demanding “control over ghetto institutions” and the right to “build Black pride and consciousness.” As they gradually achieved their demands, some in this new movement had become “advocates of violence as a means of defending ghetto residents against police brutality.” And by fighting back, they believed that two things were being accomplished. First, violence in response to violence was a means to necessary empowerment. The man who allowed a government officer to knock him down, in the ideology of Black Power, was

6. Benson, “Militant Ideologies,” 328.

7. *Ibid.*, 333.

a man deprived of his manhood. Second, this constituted “an effective strategy for bringing attention of authorities [both locally and federally] to Negro problems.”⁸

Among the many blacks who were consistently frustrated by the system were Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, California. In the fall of 1966 they formed what was known as the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. They chose the panther as their emblem because it was “known to be an animal that never makes an unprovoked attack, but will defend itself vehemently when attacked.” They considered themselves a necessary and often symbolic organization for standing against oppression by local authorities.⁹ For example, upon the arrival in San Francisco of Betty Shabazz, the widow of Malcolm X, she was “escorted and guarded by the Black Panthers.” And as the Panthers earned credibility in the black community, their aims expanded. Rather than just fighting police brutality and protecting notable citizens, they began to implement “free breakfast” programs for needy school children, while organizing anti-war rallies to encourage “black people and other minorities to resist the military draft and to resist fighting in Vietnam.”¹⁰

The 1968 assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. (April 4) and Bobby Kennedy (June 6) made this a pivotal year in the political and racial struggle. The first assassination signified an end to the most prominent voice of non-violent action in the black community. The second signaled an unofficial end to the fight against poverty by leaders in Washington. Richard Nixon, who inherited the social programs of the Johnson administration, was unlikely to encourage any further support for the War on Poverty. For most of his administration, he was either fully engrossed in the conflicts and costs of Vietnam or battling his own demons of internal conspiracy.

8. *Ibid.*, 330.

9. Harris, “Black Nationalism,” 412.

10. *Ibid.*, 414.

In the eyes of many Americans—both black and white—the battle for civil rights had finally been exhausted. All that could be done had been done. But contrary to popular opinion, the fight wasn't over. Black Power was now a rising anti-poverty force to be reckoned with in American society.

It should be noted with empathy that the Black Power movement and its extended organizations were not created for the *purpose* of hatred and violence. On the contrary, they were extremists by the necessity of self defense and social empowerment for those who couldn't help themselves. Shelby Steele, most known for his writings on the subject of peaceful race relations, described this as “reaching back from a moving train to lift on board those who have no tickets.”¹¹ In other words, when the movement for civil rights stopped, a significant part of the black community began moving forward, but a great many were left standing on the curb. The latter group just needed the aid of American compassion. Johnson had intended that charity would be colorblind, but even in 1965 he had to acknowledge that poverty had its own kind of segregation:

Negro poverty is not white poverty. Many of its causes and many of its cures are the same. But there are differences—deep, corrosive, obstinate differences—radiating painful roots into the community, into the family, and the nature of the individual. . . . These differences are not racial differences. They are solely and simply the consequence of ancient brutality, past injustice, and present prejudice. They are anguishing to observe. For the Negro they are a constant reminder of oppression.¹²

The Negro, like these others [in poverty], will have to rely mostly upon his own efforts. But he just cannot do it alone. . . . Much of the Negro community is buried under a blanket of history and circumstances. It is not a lasting

11. Steele, *Content of Our Character*, 108.

12. Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 227.

solution to lift just one corner of that blanket. We must stand on all sides and we must raise the entire cover if we are to liberate our fellow citizens.¹³

Johnson was suggesting that the racial divide would not be cured by lawmakers in Washington but by the everyday citizens of present and future generations. It would require the black community to forgive past offenses and the white community to acknowledge their imperfect history. Furthermore, those suffering in poverty—whether black or otherwise—would need to “rely mostly” on their own efforts, with the compassionate aid of the American middle and upper class. In Johnson’s eyes, even with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that passed under his watchful administration, the “blanket of history and circumstances” was still covering most of the black community. Only a corner had been lifted.

Before his untimely death in 1968, King had already begun to acknowledge the possibility of a violent explosion in the inner city in the days and years ahead. Speaking to a government that had failed its impoverished citizens, he said, “If you do not begin to use your vast resources of wealth to lift God’s children from the dungeons of despair and poverty, then you are writing your own obituary.”¹⁴

With Malcolm, King, and two Kennedy brothers now gone, with the already frustrated Johnson out of office, and with a decade of revolution now closed, the Black Church returned to the forefront as an advocate for the rights and privileges of the poor and racially oppressed.

It was the faith of the Black Church that provided black people with the courage to fight against great odds, giving them the hope that the goal of justice would eventually be achieved.¹⁵

13. Ibid.

14. Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 69.

15. Ibid., 64.

By merging a spiritual legacy of hope and redemption from centuries of oppression with the fight for Black Power on a local level, the Black Church soon came to adopt a doctrine known as Black Liberation Theology. Previously, the Black Church had done little “systematic reflection in the area of theology” and all previous attempts had been “presented in the forms of sermons, songs, prayers, testimonies, and stories of slavery and oppression.”¹⁶ With such minimal experience in the field of theology, their beliefs would be thrown out by the orthodox Christian worldview. And as members of the Black Church turned their attention to the streets, orthodox Christians began their own debate over how much a heaven-bound believer should be engaged in the complicated political affairs of the world.



In order to more fully engage the subject of Black Liberation Theology in the pages ahead, the following chapter will be a timely detour into this uncomfortable debate between people of an orthodox Christian worldview. My own theological views are likely to emerge.

16. *Ibid.*, 78.

Between Heaven and Earth

FOR THE better part of two millennia, Christian theology has been regarded as an intellectual crusade to understand and interpret the Bible. Humans being imperfect as they are, theologies have often resulted from human debate over complex issues found within the pages of Scripture. One recent example is the conversation between *covenant* theologians and *dispensational* theologians. The former believe that all Scripture was written to and for Christian application, while the latter believe that God dealt with the nation of Israel under a system of law far different from the system of grace he later instituted for the body of Christ. On the surface, the argument may seem mindlessly petty, but the consequences of either view can affect how people interpret the biblical instructions of God for their lives.

To continue this illustration, there are few Christians of either persuasion who disparage the other for failing to use the Bible as the basis for doctrinal disagreement. If anything, dispensational believers often accuse covenant believers of *misusing* or poorly applying a biblical text and vice versa. The common denominator has, in fact, always been an attempt to carefully handle the Word of God in good counsel: “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”¹

When theology is without a shared basis in Scripture as its final authority, it can only be rooted in the imperfections of hu-

1. 2 Timothy 2:15.

man experience. This is not to deny the realities of our existence, but to defend the authority of God's written word. Without it, Christians frequently end up creating their own version of God, based on any number of human emotions and possibilities. If Scripture becomes a secondary, or worse, an irrelevant source to one's belief system, then this hardly constitutes a sound theology. In order for a set of doctrines to be understood and appreciated by the greater community of faith, there must be a divine constant that all members acknowledge as their solid foundation.

As the previous chapter described, Black Liberation Theology soon emerged from the localized struggle for Black Power but would receive little or no recognition within the evangelical community as a viable creed. For those who knew it existed, Black Theology was seen as nothing more than a bitter and confrontational cult. Angry or not, the challenges faced by impoverished blacks were immense, and the gradual emigration of whites from urban America during desegregation—commonly known as “white flight”—left a hole of unresolved problems throughout the inner city. And it was here that proponents of Black Liberation would begin establishing a permanent residence in the church.

For the rest of the Christian community, an escalating conflict arose over the level to which people of faith should continue interacting with world affairs like politics and poverty. In many ways, their debate was a convenient way of excusing their political disagreements. Believers could fall back on the promise that they were heaven bound and allow themselves to become disengaged from the problems of a dying and sinful world.

Evangelical Christians have always been torn between the hope of heaven and the stranglehold of earth. With an eye toward heaven, many will testify that faith teaches them to steer clear of anything political that might entangle them in the present world.

And be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.²

For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.³

Others will contend that an absolute detachment only hinders the plan and purpose of the believer who was made to serve as the light of a dying world.

That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world.⁴

For those who testify of their biblical responsibility to *evangelize* the world unto Christ—hence the familiar term of *evangelical* Christians—this conflict becomes even more difficult. During a recent political rally, an elderly gentleman was overheard speaking to a nearby woman about an awkward experience he had shared with two Christians the previous week. He explained that on a bright and sunny afternoon, two men approached his door with a Bible and a question.

“Can we have a few minutes of your time?” they asked. Almost immediately, he brought them inside and showed them the things he had left to do in the backyard. The old man offered them a rake and a shovel and said, “I’ll hear whatever you’ve got to say if you give me a hand with my work.” Rather than sharing an afternoon of fellowship, the two men perceived this singular task as a hindrance to their door-to-door endeavor and asked if they could come back later. He wasn’t interested and they never returned.

2. Romans 12:2.

3. 1 Timothy 6:7.

4. Philippians 2:15.

The gospel, for all that it offers eternally, can seem like a cold and lifeless message to those who view Christians as disengaged from the present world. Evangelism has, in many ways, become an intellectual exercise for much of the Christian community who wish to share their faith but have difficulty merging the doctrines they know with the practical grace they were called to share. This imbalance has left an open door for many believers—even Bible believing Christians—to see the *traditional* gospel as wholly insufficient to the task of evangelism.

Still, the truest gospel is inextricably tied to the word of God and cannot, therefore, be molded and reshaped at the whim of frustrated people. A distinction must be drawn between those who preach the gospel and the gospel that is preached. Where humans are fallible, the gospel is not. Two men who fail to seize an opportunity will never invalidate the soundness of the eternal hope that they could and should have given.

Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.⁵

Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned . . .⁶

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.⁷

5. 1 Corinthians 15:1–4.

6. Romans 5:12.

7. Romans 3:23.

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.⁸

The unequivocal gospel teaches that everyone was born into sin through the fall of Adam but that through faith and trust in Jesus Christ, who suffered and died, everyone has the hope of being redeemed from an otherwise eternal separation from God. This life being just a flicker compared to the next, the gospel has always been about preparing for what is to come. Those who put their faith in Christ are given the promise of a future in heavenly realms, but they know they must first endure this present world with all its problems.

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.⁹

In the midst of hardship, some have come to accept an alternative gospel in which they are, in fact, fighting against flesh and blood. Under this new gospel, human beings work against one another to improve social conditions for themselves and those around them. Not surprisingly, the Apostle Paul once “marveled” at the way believers could “pervert” the message of heavenly redemption in order to fight a war with one another over temporary concerns of a terrestrial world.

I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. . . . For do I now persuade men, or God?

8. Ephesians 2:8–9.

9. Ephesians 6:12.

or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ. But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ.¹⁰

With regard to social responsibility, few believers can or should argue against doing good for the unfortunate. But doing good in one's community is not in keeping with the tenets of a biblical gospel unless the primary goal is to represent and teach the hope of eternal salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ. This is a crucial and missing piece for many, whether they be extreme in their theology or not.

Over the years, many Bible believing ministries have conjured up a false illusion of Christianity to suggest that faith is a means to human prosperity. The price paid two thousand years ago on the cross of Calvary does not exempt anyone from trouble in this life. Nor should vulnerable onlookers to Christianity be misled by haughty suggestions that faith will make them rich or bring them health. The gospel of salvation gives hope toward the next life and strength to achieve contentment in this one. Hence, when people of faith suffer oppression from their enemies they ought not interpret every negative experience as unjust. To suffer and endure tribulation is a known consequence for every body broken by the sin of Adam.

For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake; having the same conflict which ye saw in me, and now hear to be in me.¹¹

10. Galatians 1:6–13.

11. Philippians 1:29–30.

In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.¹²

And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.¹³

If, then, the gospel espoused in the word of God is a hope based in eternal life and not a hope that releases us from suffering in the present world, the church can and often does play a role in helping to lighten the load of any weaker members until the Lord's return.

But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work: (As it is written, He hath dispersed abroad; he hath given to the poor: his righteousness remaineth forever. Now he that ministereth seed to the sower both minister bread for your food, and multiply your seed sown, and increase the fruits of your righteousness;) being enriched in everything to all bountifulness, which causeth through us thanksgiving to God. For the administration of this service not only supplieth the want of the saints, but is abundant also by many thanksgivings unto God; whiles by the experiment of this ministration may glorify God for your professed subjection unto the gospel of Christ, and for your liberal distribution unto them, and unto all men.¹⁴

12. John 16:33b.

13. 2 Corinthians 12:9.

14. 2 Corinthians 9:6–13.

Believers will endure their own share of weaknesses, but through those infirmities, they realize that God's grace is sufficient for their need.¹⁵ Having recognized the personal sufficiency of grace, believers should "abound to every good work" on behalf of those who lack. In other words, those who have much have much to offer. Those who have little know not what it is to have enough.

Bearing in mind all the history and politics that were covered in the preceding chapters, it is curious to note the praise of Scripture for those who provide a "liberal distribution" to all. The use of "liberal" is most intriguing in the classical text because political liberalism today is often understood as unrestricted generosity. Conservative Christians tend to oppose reactionary giving in favor of conditional gifts and the discretionary use of abundant finances. To give exceedingly without limit is to risk being foolish with one's own charity. Yet, to restrict one's giving is to risk being anything but gracious.

Finding the balance between unconditional grace and discretionary spending is, perhaps, one of the most overlooked problems in the *active* Christian church today. If a church is compassionate enough to serve in the local community, the most liberal assembly will tend to give graciously above and beyond the call of duty, sometimes at the expense of caring for their own needs. On the other hand, the most conservative assembly will tend to give cautiously and earn praise for their budgetary wisdom, at the expense of ignoring the most troubled areas where grace was needed more abundantly.

Biblical grace is an unmerited favor given to those who are not deserving. Christians often speak of grace in abstract and spiritual terms without acknowledging the need for its practical application. Nonetheless, it is difficult to deny the fact that applicative grace is needed most in the poor and impoverished areas of our local communities. Sadly, however, there are some who would contend that grace is greater when given to those

15. 2 Corinthians 12:9.

who have plenty. This type of rationale can be found in the voice of a classic conservative who spoke on issues of poverty during the stalemate years of World War I.

The poor will always be with us. They always have been; why change? They have always been uncomfortable; why experiment? Time has sanctified poverty, made it sacred. It has always been. Let it always be.¹⁶

These are obviously harsh words from a man who might have second guessed his own opinions if he had survived to live through the challenges of the Great Depression. But speaking when he did on the matter, his views are summarized this way:

Without slums there would be no charity organizations and spirit of social service and benevolence. . . . While the poor themselves may not receive much of what is donated for charity, if there were no poor, nothing would be donated. Hence the poor are indispensable.¹⁷

However cold and hopeless his words may seem, they express an honest point nonetheless. If we were capable of creating a world where all had plenty, benevolence would quickly disappear. What reason would people have to give anything if their neighbors already had everything? The ongoing existence of poverty in the world teaches people of faith to graciously give of themselves in the way that Christ gave of himself on the cross.

The poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.¹⁸

16. Weeks, "Conservative's View," 780.

17. *Ibid.*, 781.

18. Deuteronomy 15:11.

For ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good: but me ye have not always.¹⁹

While these verses indicate a responsibility to do good for the needy, one of the great challenges for many Christians is a biblical belief that the poor are penniless because of their own idle foolishness. Unlike the rebel wanderings of a rich man who wants to experience a poor man's life, Scripture often speaks of those who make foolish choices and thus end up in a form of poverty that could have otherwise been avoided.

Poverty and shame shall be to him that refuseth instruction: but he that regardeth reproof shall be honored.²⁰

He that loveth pleasure shall be a poor man: he that loveth wine and oil shall not be rich.²¹

For the drunkard and the glutton shall come to poverty; and drowsiness shall clothe a man with rags.²²

Clear as it is that pleasure, drunkenness, gluttony, and the refusal to heed instruction are among the pathways to poverty, the fool's behavior does not free the wise from their duties of compassion. The prodigal child who falls to his father's feet with no excuse will not be left to die on the ground. A gracious father will take him in, clean him up, offer the same instructions of wisdom, and send him on his way again. This is the nature of grace when given in its simplest form.

Regardless of its causes, the condition of poverty has never been one in which its members are simply free to escape at will. Whether they put themselves in the poorhouse or happened to be born there, there is no biblical warning to avoid helping the poor. On the contrary, Christians were urged to give aid where

19. Mark 14:7.

20. Proverbs 13:18.

21. Proverbs 21:17.

22. Proverbs 23:21.

and when it could be given. The Apostle Paul, writing to the body of Christ, gave extensive instructions to believers about how they should treat the poor, both inside and outside the church. Lengthy as it is, the list below is hardly exhaustive of the biblical command to love thy neighbor.

Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits.²³

Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.²⁴

We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good to edification. For even Christ pleased not himself: but as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me.²⁵

For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself a servant to all, that I might gain the more. . . . To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.²⁶

Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they might be saved.²⁷

Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia; How that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality.²⁸

23. Romans 12:16.

24. Romans 12:20.

25. Romans 15:1–3.

26. 1 Corinthians 9:19, 22.

27. 1 Corinthians 10:33.

28. 2 Corinthians 8:1–2.

For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.²⁹

For if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not. For I mean not that other men be eased, and ye burdened: but by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want: that there may be equality: As it is written, He that had gathered much had nothing over; and he that had gathered little had no lack.³⁰

Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work.³¹

And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision. Only they would that we should remember the poor; the same which I also was forward to do.³²

Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself.³³

As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of the faith.³⁴

29. 2 Corinthians 8:9.

30. 2 Corinthians 8:12–15.

31. 2 Corinthians 9:7–8.

32. Galatians 2:9–10.

33. Galatians 6:2–3.

34. Galatians 6:10.

Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labor working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth.³⁵

Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.³⁶

Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men. See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men.³⁷

We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren . . . because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth.³⁸

For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content.³⁹

Charge them that are rich in this world that they be not high-minded: nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God who giveth us richly all things to enjoy: that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate: laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.⁴⁰

Frustrating as poverty may be for members of the church who work hard for the things they have, progress depends on their finding a way to merge liberal generosity with conservative wis-

35. Ephesians 4:28.

36. Philippians 2:3–4.

37. 1 Thessalonians 5:14–15.

38. 2 Thessalonians 1:3.

39. 1 Timothy 6:7–8.

40. 1 Timothy 6:17–19.

dom. No testimony can be worse than that of a man who shares of a grace he did not deserve but in the same breath condemns the poor for a life of oppression that they themselves did not always deserve. When the church wholly fails to practice grace for the poor and undeserving, it should come as no surprise that new doctrines will arise in our collective absence. Such was the case in the controversial rise of Black Liberation Theology.



With respect to the freedom of religion espoused in the Bill of Rights, one of the great miracles of our democracy has been the ability for people of faith to graciously discuss the most sacred matters upon which they disagree. But grace often loses its momentum at the juncture between faith and politics. In a recent musing over the need for *patriotic grace*, Peggy Noonan of the *Washington Post* shared similar observations.

For more and more Americans, politics has become a religion. It has become a faith. People find their meaning in it. They define themselves by their stands. . . . When politics becomes a religion, then simple disagreements become apostasies, heresies.⁴¹

The underpinnings of Black Liberation Theology can easily be seen as far more political than religious, but the merger between liberation and theology introduced an entirely new racial perspective of God and the purpose of the church for the local community. Traditional Bible believers saw the movement as a departure from sound doctrine, while those within the movement were finding the greater Christian community to be an enemy composed of graceless hypocrites. If the rest of the church was going to ignore the plight of the nation's less fortunate and oppressed citizens, then Black Power would become its own religion, and the Black Church would be the catalytic vessel for its theology.

41. Noonan, *Patriotic Grace*, 50–51.

The Most Segregated Hour

ON MARCH 18, 2008, as Barack Obama rose to the stage in Philadelphia, political commentators were on pins and needles over how he was going to address the angry racism of his friend and mentor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright. With an eye toward a more perfect union, the soon-to-be elected president offered his initial thoughts on the current state of race relations in America. “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.”¹ This “old truism” of which he spoke was, quite literally, ripped from the pages of Black Liberation Theology’s most prominent spokesperson, James H. Cone.

In Bearden, like the rest of America, *Sunday was the most segregated day of the week*. Black and white Christians had virtually no social or religious dealing with each other, even though both were Baptists and Methodists—reading the same Bible, worshipping the same God, and reciting the same confessions of faith in their congregations.²

Cone was making a simple yet overlooked point. The Civil Rights Act had forced the integration of public life during the week, but on the weekend, church was the second most obvious

1. Obama, “More Perfect Union,” par. 33.
2. Cone, *Risks of Faith*, xi (italics added).

place of segregation (inner city being the first). On a Tuesday morning, white prejudice might have to stomach working in an office with black prejudice, but when it came to the Sunday service, each man went his own way. By law, the government was never going to intrude on matters of the church or force white men to worship in the pews with black women, so the fires of segregation continued in the most sacred place of all.

When the nation lost Malcolm in 1965 and Martin in 1968, it seemed as though the tables had begun to flip in American race relations. Prior to the civil rights era, whites were all too often the face of violence against black equality. But by the end of the 1960s, whites had become far less violent and far more subtle in their discrimination. Instead of burning crosses and lynching citizens, the message of white supremacy turned much more quiet. Fathers would explain to their children that an inner city thug life was no way to live, and the kids would invariably learn that the face of the American ghetto was black. Quite simply, the successful black man was gradually seen as an exception to the rule in the white community. He would be, to the average white citizen, what others in the black community could be if they weren't quite so black.

As a result, *blackness* came to embody for most Americans a symbol of crime, poverty, and gang violence. And the black community heard the message loud and clear. Long after the days of slavery and public segregation, blackness was being portrayed as a lesser part of society. One of the few remaining institutions willing to combat this downgrading ideology was the Black Church. Through the writing and teaching of Cone, they found "a new way of doing theology that would empower the suffering black poor to fight for a more liberated existence."³

To a mainstream Christian, the concept of "doing theology" in light of human experience was like saying that truth could be entirely relative. And as the Black *Church* attempted to represent

3. *Ibid.*, xxii.

the black *community*, fighting for “a more liberated existence” meant doing theology in ways that were strangely unorthodox. Cone was without any peer accountability for his theology. And as it turned out, if accountability meant hearing the voice of a theologically-minded white majority, he would have no part of it. Nor would Scripture have any authority if it contradicted his own experience.

I still regard the Bible as an important source of my theological reflections, but not the starting point. The black experience and the Bible together in dialectical tension serve as my point of departure today and yesterday. The order is significant. I am black first—and everything else comes after that. This means that I read the Bible through the lens of a black tradition of struggle and not as the objective Word of God.⁴

In the mind of Cone, the white community of faith were not welcome to assess Black Theology and certainly not if they were intending to hold his feet to the fire of Scripture. In the twenty-first century, it may seem absurd that anyone’s theology could be untouchable by the criticisms of those who wear a different color of skin. After all, no one would have questioned the right of a black man, then or now, to argue against the teachings of Billy Graham or Joel Osteen simply because these were white men. Still, whites were being written out of the equation, and it was deemed taboo for anyone in the white community to engage the subject.

The term black theology was created in this social and religious context. It was initially understood as the theological arm of Black Power, and it enabled us to express our theological imagination in the struggle of freedom independently of white theologians.⁵

4. Quoted in Mansfield, *Barack Obama*, 41–42.

5. Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 42.

As the objects of great oppression for many years, it seemed understandable that Cone might want to argue for a new and more humanizing independence from the white community for blacks. But in doing so, he was countering the very efforts of integration that had given him a voice in the first place. And it got worse.

There is no use for a God who loves whites the same as blacks. What we need is the divine love as expressed in Black Power which is the power of black people to destroy their oppressors, here and now, by any means at their disposal. . . . The black theologian must reject any conception of God which stifles black self-determination by picturing God as a God of all peoples.⁶

Black theology must realize that the white Jesus has no place in the black community, and it is our task to destroy him. . . . For too long Christ has been pictured as a blue-eyed honky. Black theologians are right; we need to dehonkify him and thus make him relevant to the black condition.⁷

Black Liberation Theology was now serving as a theological justification for Black Power, designed to “politicize Christianity” as a wing of violent self defense in the black community. Cone was going after the most sacred images of the church.⁸ Sunday school material that painted every biblical character with white skin was now at the forefront of controversy. If these were residents of a Middle Eastern society, Black Theology argued, a blond-haired, blue-eyed image was entirely misleading. Inner city churches even took stock of God’s physical image and contemplated a more difficult problem among those oppressed by poverty and racial discrimination.

6. Williams, “Black Theology,” 564.

7. Mansfield, *Barack Obama*, 42.

8. Calhoun-Brown, “Image of God,” 206.

The radical idea that God or Jesus, the ultimate value of religion, shares the race of the oppressed was to be a source of strength for liberation. . . . It was not and is not a question of whether God is physically black, but it is a question of whether a man who is black can identify with a white God and depend on his love and protection.⁹

If white skin was the image of past oppression and Christianity had long been painting the savior of the world with a white face, it was argued that members of the Black Church would never be willing to fully embrace the faith of Christ. Rational as it may have been to someone like Cone, what it produced was a theological reason to see whiteness as the enemy of blackness. And for the darker brothers of poverty who were easily influenced, this was an easy sell. Cone managed to convince the most vulnerable black citizens that their very plight was the continued and endless fault of the white man. In the scattered pulpits where Black Liberation Theology was preached, Cone was on par with, if not greater than, the most valuable theologians of world history.

Due to the complex nature of poverty and the challenges of war, most Americans were content to remove their hands from the inner city and allow the Black Church to practice its social theology. Johnson's War on Poverty had been a five-year government solution for the "other America." It didn't work. Cone's Black Liberation Theology was now a long-term spiritual solution for empowering the darker brothers of poverty. But instead of curing the ailments of a weaker society, he instilled within the poor a self-defeating anger that blamed the white world and justified its own actions as the never ending curse of white oppression.

However good their intentions may have been, both Johnson and Cone were up against an institution of poverty that has plagued social progress in nation after nation throughout

9. *Ibid.*, 199.

history. Both men had tried to formulate a proper remedy to solve past and present wrongs, but the end result was the same as that of all who came before them. For Johnson, the War on Poverty dissolved in the evolution of Washington politics. For Cone, Black Liberation Theology took root in the pulpits of inner city black communities but managed to solve few of the historic problems it had set out to fix.



During a recent early morning classroom session at a predominantly white Christian university, several students were roused to a debate over a group of state legislators who had apologized for the historic sanction of slavery and segregation. The most vocal class members shared concern that these apologies (at least five states had made similar confessions) might lead to reparations—federal compensation to the descendants of slavery. It wasn't long before the conversation turned to white frustrations about the black community.

One girl in particular mentioned that she had recently tried to get involved in a childhood social services program downtown but found that several of the black children were quick to say, "I don't want no white girl tryin' to tell me how to live my life." Alas, from an early age, inner city kids had learned that white skin was the equivalent of an oppressive and patronizing group who had no purpose or value in the black community. Cone's approach to theology could now be heard from the lips of the innocent.

Over the years, Black Liberation Theology has proved itself incapable of producing any kind of measurable change for the weaker members of society. The poor of the inner city are not in a better condition today than they were decades ago. The rhetoric and *audacity* of Black Theology may be preached every Sunday, but the people for whom that hope was intended still remain desperate and angry. The current guards of the inner city will either need to alter their message or accept that the time for theological accountability between black and white Christians has come.

Faith, Work, and Politics as Usual

IN THE sandwich line of a local Burger King was where I learned my earliest lesson on racial profiling. As I quietly worked on my side of the Whopper table, one of the supervisors began speaking in Spanish with an employee on the other side of my line. And with casual immaturity, I asked, “What part of Mexico are you from?”

Almost immediately, our eyes locked. Had he been any younger I might have been thrown to the floor. But he held his composure and answered, “Listen, kid. Just because someone speaks Spanish doesn’t mean they’re from Mexico. Do you know how many people speak Spanish in this country? For that matter, do you know how many Spanish-speaking countries there are in the world? Let me give you a word of advice. Don’t ever ask that question to an American unless you’re looking for a fight.”

Prior to our conversation, I had taken two trips to Mexico with two different church youth groups. I had two years of high school Spanish under my belt and no reason to think myself ignorant of geography. Still, I had managed to profile a man based on unfair assumptions. We were both Americans. Yet I was looking at him as though he were an illegal alien in my country, as though he didn’t belong because his language and features were not like mine.

Ignorance is not a cause for shame if we learn from our mistakes. But not all profiling is ignorant or accidental. Much of it, as I’ve witnessed, is perpetual and slanderous. Forty years

after the civil rights movement, at a time when the vast majority of racism is exercised by those who declare themselves “not racist,” these personal stories may come as a shock to many who thought the lingering effects of white supremacy were over.



Below is a letter I wrote to the regional director of a local restaurant after several years of tolerating some of the most disturbing scenes and conversations of my entire career in hospitality.

As an original member of [your] opening waitstaff, I wanted to thank you for always taking time to visit and encourage our store to be the best in the business. However, as an original member of this restaurant, I must confess that the following information is not going to sit well.

Over the past two and a half years, I've become a silent witness to endless counts of racial discrimination toward guests and fellow employees, personal threats of violence (no joke), sexual harassment with no thought for who is watching, and an ever-present supply of unprofessional language within earshot of children and families who simply want a peaceful dining experience. During my tenure, I have brought every one of my concerns up to management at different times, but have generally been passed over with statements like, “We're taking care of it.” Without fail, I witness these things every week, every day, and every shift.

One white employee has threatened to “slit” a black employee's throat and yet, when management was made aware of the threat, the white employee was retained. Employees have joked about having a “noose” for fellow black employees and yet they are laughed at even by the managers. Employees who have slandered their own guests and the guests of others as “f---ing n---ers” are patronized and told to relax. These staff members seem to enjoy the laughter of the majority who accept

this as “the way it is around here.” And my list could go on and on.

Just yesterday, a server approached me and asked, “Would you mind taking Table 213?” At which point, I leaned around to notice who they were and asked why. Her reply was quite simple. “Because I don’t feel like dealing with black people today.” This, of course, falls on the heels of hearing another server stand at a computer saying, “Well, you definitely know a person’s color of skin by the way that they tip.” How is this a business that any adult can or should be proud to serve and cheer?

As a man of faith, a man of principle, and a man of business, my toleration level for these things has reached its boiling point and I’m beyond angry. Early on, our first General Manager made it clear that ours was a “zero tolerance” policy for discrimination and racism. But within about a year, my respect for his words went out the window. For every intolerable act that I witnessed and testified in private, both he and other managers continually let such actions pass with hardly a reprimand or a concern. And the problem continues to be ignored.

Speeches in staff meeting never have resolved the practical disregard that happens on the floor of this restaurant. We can preach, shout, or declare from the rooftops that these things need to end, but words have yet to bring about a change. No one would ever publically admit to misconduct, nor have I chosen to use names in this letter. More than likely, you could read this in the middle of a staff meeting and the notable perpetrators of these accusations would look around baffled as though it couldn’t possibly have any reference to them. So honestly, I’m not sure how you heal the wounds of such a vastly unprofessional restaurant without starting over with a complete personnel overhaul. But that’s again why I’m appealing to you and your drive to make us the “best” in the business.

When this store came to town, I was incredibly honored to have a spot serving the guests who walked in our front doors. I've been in hospitality for more than twelve years and always enjoy the chance to make a grumpy person smile or a hungry man satisfied. That's the business. That's what we do. That's what we're here for. And somewhere in the past two years, our staff and our management have used that sense of hospitality as a mask. In theory, we say we believe in it, but the racism, the threats, the private (and public) disregard of every guest . . . these things remind me that we have a long way to go.

My hope is that through these words and any action you may take, we might begin to set in motion the steps that once again make this a proud place to work. Thank you in advance for your time and your listening ear.

On the day that I had planned to give this to our regional director, it occurred to me that such a scathing assault on my place of employment would do little good if the chain of command were to be ignored. The intended recipient was three pay scales above any supervisor or manager to whom I was directly responsible. So, in the interest of keeping peace where possible, I sat down with two managers and three staff members and had them read through my words. Of the five who read through it, both managers were ready and willing to admit their own negligence. They expressed a firm desire to make this their number one priority over the next several weeks. Needless to say, the letter landed in the glove box of my truck, and no one else has read it until now.

At the time I wrote those words, the subject of race had become a dominant issue in several areas of my life. When I wasn't working at the restaurant or teaching school, most of my spare time was spent building and moderating a Web site for dispensational believers around the world. The purpose of the ministry was and is to coordinate a list of churches and interactive forums

for isolated men and women looking for a place to fellowship with those of like mind.

Late in the previous year, I had been asked by several members of our ministry to review the video of an affiliated preacher who was allegedly teaching his Bible students the basics of racial prophecy. If it was true, I knew that something would have to be said or ties would need to be broken. By no means would I allow myself to continue sending believers in the direction of a church where such things were openly declared from the pulpit. Others who were much closer to the man expressed a similar sentiment. No one would want to be associated with such blatantly false teaching. Or so I thought.

Racial prophecy, as referred to in chapter 1, is based on the dispersion of families that began after the flood in the house of Noah.

And the sons of Noah, that went forth of the ark, were Shem, and Ham, and Japheth: and Ham is the father of Canaan. These are the three sons of Noah: and of them was the whole earth overspread. And Noah began to be an husbandman, and he planted a vineyard: And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without. And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father's nakedness. And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. And he said, Blessed be the Lord God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant.¹

1. Genesis 9:18–27.

According to those who teach racial prophecy, the “black man” is a resultant child of Noah’s curse on Ham. In other words, the “curse” of Ham is that he and his descendants became slaves to the other families of the earth—more specifically, that they became *black* slaves. During and before the Civil War, this was called the *Noahic curse*, as taught by Southern preachers (known as “divines”) seeking to maintain their sacred right to slavery.

Most divines turned to the Noahic curse to provide a racial justification for the specific enslavement of blacks . . .²

Many divines did invoke the Noahic curse and the supposed black descent from Ham in an ideology that took deep root among the people, but [over time] other prominent divines regarded it with suspicion since neither the Bible nor science demonstrated that the blacks descended from Ham.³

After watching the content I had been asked to evaluate, it was clear that the charge of teaching racial prophecy was indeed more than an empty accusation. Here, in late 2007, I was sadly watching the video of a contemporary preacher who saw “the black man” as the object of a biblical curse. I documented all my concerns and conveyed them to the men who had asked for my input. As I waited for decisions to be made, another issue in American race relations soon caught my attention.

Politics had given rise to an eloquent black orator named Barack Obama. But his Achilles heel, at least initially, was his close affiliation with a fire-breathing reverend from Chicago. With Obama under pressure to speak on the current problems of racism, most of the country eagerly awaited the Philadelphia speech that would quickly be dubbed “A More Perfect Union.” As a student of politics, I was already familiar with “Obama Fever” before it reached the presidential stage. Only two months after

2. Genovese, *Consuming Fire*, 4.

3. *Ibid.*, 81.

his towering win from Iowa and the early chants of “Yes, we can,” a growing number of Americans were beginning to question his controversial church affiliation. And he was responsible to give an answer.

My spiritual concerns were two-fold at the time. I wanted to know what his plain-spoken views were on the controversial message of Black Liberation Theology. And secondly, if he disowned such a racially-oriented teaching, why had he remained so long affiliated with those who preached it from the pulpit?

At the time, the Illinois senator had practically catapulted into the spotlight, and many of the people in my social circle were already demonizing him with accusations that every credible source had consistently proven false. The slightest defense of Obama on my part, as an independent voter, was met with rolled eyes and ridiculous nonsense. As far as I could see, no one cared to discuss the problems with Obama’s theology because there was greater joy to be found in passing along false rumor and innuendo. Granted, a few were willing to think outside the box of propaganda, but as the weeks went on, I heard more and more Christians talking as though they were political experts with a background in exorcism. By some estimations, Obama was inhabited by the devil (or “many devils” depending on the source), and those who believed this to be the case were eager to testify of their remarkable insight.

Political news junkies like myself were eating up the coverage, but I was gradually getting more and more discouraged by the number of friendly believers who had fallen in love with campaign gossip. Such conversations made it incredibly difficult to break through the heart of necessary concerns like Black Liberation Theology. If, for instance, this theology was as dangerous as many were making it out to be, then it needed to be a subject of discussion apart from Senator Obama. Between the “Perfect Union” speech and the latter half of the primary, most of the news and argumentative posturing grew quiet on the subject

of race relations in America. But for me, three racial problems were still nagging at my conscience.

The first, of course, was whether I could continue to ignore the teaching of racial prophecy by a familiar preacher. Secondly, when it came to white Christians talking politics, I found few who could see Obama for anything more than a black man from a racist church. Any attempt to discuss the root problems that might have led to that racism was a futile effort. For most, it didn't matter, so long as he didn't get elected to the White House. I, on the other hand, felt that if it was problematic enough to keep a man from winning an election, then it was problematic enough to be assessed as a spiritual and biblical concern within the church.

It was my third issue of conscience, however, that sent me over the top. On one particularly hot summer day at our restaurant, several of our staff members were lounging outside between shifts. Occasionally, those who were still taking tables inside would wander out to enjoy a little conversation or a quick meal. Exhausted from the sun, I was sitting with my eyes closed when someone whispered quietly to another server, "Listen, do you want my Mondays from table 53?" The question didn't make sense as it was worded, so I opened my eyes in bewilderment.

"Do you really want to know, Jeremy?" He asked.

"Sure, I guess."

"Well, see, Mondays are a term that we use to describe black people who sit in our sections. They take a lot of work, but they don't pay any extra in the end. Just like a typical Monday."

"You're right, brother. I didn't want to know."

Later that month, my ears caught the edge of another, far more disheartening conversation. Three fellow staff members were huddled around the coffee machine as one said to the other. "I think he has AIDS. Look at him. Table 13. What do you think?" When I turned in the direction of their voices, all three were staring out into the dining room to catch a glimpse of a black man in African dress. Gradually, the discussion turned to ridiculous

methods by which someone could or could not acquire the AIDS virus, but no one thought to chastise the originator of such foolish accusations. Later that hour, I brought lunch to the guests at table 13, then returned to the server who had begun the racial slander.

“You make me sick,” I said.

Upon hearing me get so serious, he replied, “Listen, man, it was just a joke. We were just foolin’ around.”

“Then explain to me the punch line because as far as I can tell, it isn’t funny. And my guess is, the people at table 13 wouldn’t find it funny either.” As I walked away, he began offering up a series of excuses. Only later did he approach me with a worthless apology, as though I were the offended party.

The problem wasn’t an isolated joke in poor taste but racism itself. Only, in the twenty-first century, perpetrators of racial denigration typically count themselves innocent for fear of being labeled a racist. When it appears they’ve caused an offense, they justify their actions by declaring a momentary lapse in judgment. Or worse, when no one speaks out, racism just bubbles in the pot of our allegedly civil society.

By the middle of the summer, none of my concerns had been addressed. When it came to an affiliated teaching of racial prophecy, I was eventually rejected as someone who had made an issue out of nothing. When it came to standing up against racism at work, my letter was forgotten by those who had been eager to help. And when it came to dealing with the flawed theology of Black Liberation, most of my evangelical peers were enraptured with the goal of slandering a presidential candidate.

Perhaps I had become too ideological. Perhaps I had become just another face in the crowded terrain of white guilt. But whatever it was I had become was irrelevant. I was looking for an open and gracious audience with whom I could process these truths of segregation still hindering our advancement as Christians, as Americans, and as a people.



Conclusion

THE PRESENT state of race relations in America is an interesting one to say the least. For the first time in our history, an African American has been elected to serve in the highest office of our land. And aside from any liberal views or controversial associations he may have, the fellowship between Barack Obama and his primarily black church in Chicago is one that many still find themselves unable to comprehend. After all, his cool talk is the polar opposite of an angry walk.

But mine is not a case against Barack Obama. For that, I leave you to read the credible and often challenging works of David Freddoso (*The Case Against Barack Obama: The Unlikely Rise and Unexamined Agenda of the Media's Favorite Candidate*), Shelby Steele (*A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited about Obama and Why He Can't Win*), David Mendell (*From Promise to Power*), and Stephen Mansfield (*The Faith of Barack Obama*). Or, if you're determined to live among the limitless stories of political fantasy, I leave you to enjoy the frequently absurd writings of Jerome Corsi (*The Obama Nation: Leftist Politics and the Cult of Personality*), Webster Tarpley (*Obama: The Postmodern Coup*), and Andy Martin (*Obama: The Man behind the Mask*). Plenty has been and will be written to deal with the pros and cons of our forty-fourth president, but those matters belong to another controversy. Mine is a case against the understandable but flawed teaching of Black Liberation Theology.

Deep within the controversy of Black Liberation is one notable strength. Whether it be the impoverished, the veteran, or the child with no future, all Americans should have an equal opportunity for a better future, regardless of the conditions that

have made their path more difficult. Followers of Black Theology have long represented this power and strength for the weak and weary. They are, for the inner cities of this nation, a social alternative to government intervention. Indeed, when more churches are willing to serve the people of their local communities with comparable vigor, the rhetorical visions of hope and change won't have to come from Washington.

Unfortunately, Black Liberation has more weaknesses than it has strengths. At least three immediately come to mind. First, in an effort to empower the oppressed, its proponents have segregated their message and brought about a new generation of racial misunderstanding. Preaching of this kind fosters an image that whites are, in all cases, part of the problem. And where whites are made eternally guilty for the color of their skin, blacks—both congregants and preachers—receive a natural upper hand.

Some might argue that in the middle of the last century, the time had come for blacks to be empowered by their *blackness* after so many years of being oppressed by whites who flattered themselves with their *whiteness*. That may be true, but *white* power was never an acceptable part of our nation's history. Although it seems justifiable that at some point there would have been a need for such a radical push against the grain of an oppressive white power, that time has come and gone.

The second, more theological problem with Black Liberation is that it lacks the moderating influence of accountability to a credible and sound Christian community. Those who preach an exclusionary message of God are often cited as cultish, and Black Theology cannot be immune to this criticism. Being an exclusive assembly of believers does not automatically make a group wrong, but where conflicting counsel is not considered, there can be no sound judgment.

Third and most disturbing is the humanized makeover that Black Liberation gives to God. Instead of acknowledging scriptures where the Lord presides over the rich and the poor without

racial preference, adherents insist on presenting an image of God that fits the mold of their social necessity. He becomes a part of their creation, rather than they being a part of his. Wiser counsel would insist that the God we serve in this present age is neither black nor white but eternally impartial. Whatever the color of his flesh in time past, he is a risen Lord today, for whom racial definitions are no longer relevant. Believers with sound judgment do not worship a picture or a symbol but a timeless and immortal king.

Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh:
yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet
now henceforth know we him no more.¹

Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only
wise God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.²

Orthodox Christians have often enjoyed paintings and relics that display their beliefs, but faith is not based on visible images. If, indeed, we have put our trust in Christ as the ultimate sacrifice, we have trusted in something we did not witness but now proclaim as true. This is a faith based not on what is seen, but on what is unseen: “For we walk by faith, not by sight.”³

Advocates of Black Liberation may have once felt that the painted face of Christ from the white community was a troubling image of oppression, but I would contend that any image then or now was and is irrelevant. Whether Da Vinci was more accurate in his portraits than a modern forensic expert, Christ is now a risen savior whose form is without color, size, or age. Artists are certainly free to exercise a liberal imagination, but to *preach* Christ as the God of racial preference is to sidetrack the gospel of impartial grace from the pulpit. And all too often,

1 2 Corinthians 5:16.

2 1 Timothy 1:17.

3 2 Corinthians 5:7.

listeners simply do not challenge what they hear, no matter how outlandish or contrary it might be to the word of God.

Much of our present dilemma in the Christian church is a lazy congregation. Pastors and teachers have been let loose to dictate whatever doctrines they believe will best accommodate their audience, and the people just nod their heads with enthusiasm. Fewer and fewer congregants are willing to consider that what they are hearing may not always be right, no matter how good it sounds from the lips of an eloquent preacher. Such ignorance and blind obedience can be found in all modern churches, regardless of race. Sadly, people who question the things being taught are frequently railroaded as divisive members of their assembly. So naturally, the people learn to keep quiet.

From the moment that Barack Obama came under scrutiny for his affiliation with Black Liberation, members of the evangelical community have pondered his capacity to sit under misguided theology. "If he disagreed with such extreme views," they say, "he should have left long before it became politically inconvenient." But for that matter, how can anyone hear bad teaching and not acknowledge it? The truth is, the more we embed ourselves in a particular fellowship, the more difficult it is to recognize the errors that may surround us. It happens all the time. And in that respect, Obama is no different from the rest of us.

Black Liberation Theology is just one of many imperfect teachings in the Christian church today. I have not attempted to make this guide a comprehensive history of the subject but a catalyst for further study. May you find it profitable to that end.

Bibliography

- AfricanAmericans.com. "Significant African American Firsts." Online:
<http://www.africanamericans.com/FirstsMore.htm>
- Armstrong, Karen. *Islam: A Short History*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000.
- Bennett, William J. *America: The Last Best Hope*. Vol. 1, "From the Age of Discovery to a World at War, 1492–1914." Nashville: Nelson Current, 2006.
- Benson, J. Kenneth. "Militant Ideologies and Organizational Contexts: The War on Poverty and the Ideology of Black Power." *Sociology Quarterly* 12 (1971) 328–39.
- Boyd, Herb, ed. *Autobiography of a People: Three Centuries of African American History Told by Those Who Lived It*. New York: Anchor Books, 2000.
- Calhoun-Brown, Allison. "The Image of God: Black Theology and Racial Empowerment in the African American Community." *Review of Religious Research* 40 (1999) 197–212.
- Cone, James H. *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968–1998*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1999.
- Davidson, Roger H. "The War on Poverty: Experiment in Federalism." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 385 (Sept 1969) 1–13.
- Divine, Robert A., et al. *America: Past & Present*, 8th ed. Vol. 2. New York: Pearson Education, 2007.
- Fogel, Robert William, and Stanley L. Engerman. *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974.
- Foner, Eric. *A Short History of Reconstruction*. New York: Harper & Row, 1990.

- Genovese, Eugene D. *A Consuming Fire: The Fall of the Confederacy in the Mind of the White Christian South*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998.
- Goldwater, Barry. *The Conscience of a Conservative*. New York: MJF Books, 1960.
- Haley, Alex, and Malcolm X. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Random House Publishing Group, 1965.
- Harrington, Michael. *The Other America*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1962.
- Harris, Jessica C. "Revolutionary Black Nationalism: The Black Panther Party." *The Journal of Negro History* 86 (2001) 409–21.
- Hughes, Langston. "I, Too." In *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, 46. New York: Vintage Books, 1996.
- Humphrey, Hubert. "The War on Poverty." *Law and Contemporary Problems* 31 (1966) 6–17.
- Johnson, Michael P., et al. *Reading the American Past*, 3rd ed. Vol. 2. Boston: St. Martin's Press, 2005.
- Jones, LeAlan, and Lloyd Newman. *Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." In *I Have a Dream: Writings & Speeches That Changed the World*, edited by James M. Washington, 83–100. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986.
- . "The Power of Nonviolence." In *I Have a Dream: Writings & Speeches That Changed the World*, edited by James M. Washington, 29–33. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986.
- Locke, John. *The Second Treatise of Civil Government*. n.p., 1690. Online: <http://www.constitution.org/jl/2ndtr02.htm>.
- Mansfield, Stephen. *The Faith of Barack Obama*. Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 2008.
- Noonan, Peggy. *Patriotic Grace: What It Is and Why We Need It Now*. New York: Harper Collins, 2008.
- Oates, Stephen B. *With Malice toward None: A Life of Abraham Lincoln*. New York: Harper Collins, 1977.
- Obama, Barack. *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006.

- . “A More Perfect Union.” Speech, Constitution Center, Philadelphia, March 18, 2008. No pages. Online: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88478467>.
- Penn, Sean. *Into the Wild*. DVD. Directed by Sean Penn. Hollywood: Paramount Pictures, 2007.
- Perman, Michael, ed. *Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1998.
- Powell, Adam Clayton Jr. *Adam by Adam: The Autobiography of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.* New York: Kensington, 1971.
- Schulman, Bruce J. *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism: A Brief Biography with Documents*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007.
- Senate Historical Office. “Hubert H. Humphrey, 38th Vice President (1965–1968).” U.S. Senate: Art & History. Online: http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/VP_Hubert_Humphrey.htm.
- Silverman, David S. *You Can't Air That: Four Cases of Controversy and Censorship in American Television Programming*. Television and Popular Culture. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007.
- Steele, Shelby. *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990.
- Sundquist, James L. “Co-ordinating the War on Poverty.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 385 (1969) 41–49.
- U.S. Census Bureau. “Race and Hispanic Origin: 1790 to 1990.” Online: <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0056/tab01.pdf>.
- U.S. Congress. *Report of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States*. Vol. 1, “Ku Klux Klan.” Washington, D.C., 1872. Online: <http://www.archive.org/details/reportofjointse01unit>.
- . *Report of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States*. Vol. 5, “South Carolina.” Washington, D.C., 1872. Online: <http://www.archive.org/details/reportofjointse05unit>.
- U.S. Constitution. Thirteenth Amendment. Library of Congress, Primary Documents. Online: <http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/13thamendment.html>.

- U.S. Reports. *Dred Scott v. John F. A. Sanford*. 60 (Dec Term 1856) 393.
Online: <http://openjurist.org/60/us/393>.
- . *Plessy v. Ferguson*. 163 (May 1896) 537. Online: <http://openjurist.org/163/us/537>.
- Wagner, Richard. *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia*. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006.
- Watkins, T. H. *The Great Depression: America in the 1930s*. Lebanon, IN: Little, Brown & Co., 1993.
- Weeks, Arland D. "A Conservative's View of Poverty." *The American Journal of Sociology* 22 (1917) 779–800.
- Wheeler, John W. "Civil Rights Groups: Their Impact upon the War on Poverty." *Law and Contemporary Problems* 31 (1966) 152–58.
- Williams, A. Roger. "A Black Pastor Looks at Black Theology." *The Harvard Theological Review* 64 (1971) 559–67.
- Wilson, William Julius. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Yarema, Allan. *The American Colonization Society: An Avenue to Freedom?* Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006.