A Black Theology of Liberation

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J. B. Lippincott Company
Philadelphia & New York


## Contents

General and Special Revelation .......................... 96  
Bultmann's View of New Testament Revelation ............. 102

### IV God in Black Theology

Must We Drop God-language? .................................. 110  
Hermeneutical Principle for the Doctrine of God .......... 114  
New Wine in New Wineskins ................................ 116  
God Is Black ..................................................... 120  
The Love and Righteousness of God ........................... 125  
Traditional Theological Language and the Black God .... 138

### V Man in Black Theology

American Theology, Existentialism, and Black Theology 132  
Man as a Free Being .......................................... 150  
Man as a Fallen Creature .................................... 180

### VI Christ in Black Theology

The Historical Jesus and Black Theology .................. 199  
The Character of the New Testament Jesus ................. 203  
The Black Christ ................................................ 212  
The Kingdom of God and the Black Christ ................. 220

### VII Church, World and Eschatology in Black Theology

What about Eschatology? ...................................... 228  
Index .................................................................... 251

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### Liberation as the Content of Theology

Christian theology is a theology of liberation. It is a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ. This means that its sole reason for existence is to put into ordered speech the meaning of God's activity in the world, so that the community of the oppressed will recognize that their inner thrust for liberation is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ. There can be no Christian theology which is not identified unreservedly with those who are humiliated and abused. In fact, theology ceases to be a theology of the gospel when it fails to arise out of the community of the op-
pressed. For it is impossible to speak of the God of Isra-
elite history, who is the God who revealed himself in
Jesus Christ, without recognizing that he is the God of
and for those who labor and are heavy laden.

The perspective and direction of this study are al-
ready made clear. The reader is entitled to know at the
outset what is to be defined as important. This defini-
tion and the assumptions on which it is based are to be
tested by the working out of a theology which can then
be judged according to its consistency with a commu-
nity's view of the ultimate. We begin now by exploring
some preliminary considerations in our definition.

The definition of theology as that discipline which
seeks to analyze the nature of the Christian faith in the
light of the oppressed arises chiefly from the biblical
tradition itself. (1) Though it may not be entirely clear
why God elected Israel to be his people, one point is
evident: The election is inseparable from the event of
the Exodus.

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I
broke you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.
Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my
covenant, you shall be my own possession among all
people... (Exodus 19:4-5a)

Certainly this means, among other things, that God's
call of this people is related to their oppressed condi-
tion and to his own liberating activity already seen in
the Exodus. You have seen what I did! By delivering

this people from Egyptian bondage and inaugurating
the covenant on the basis of that historical event, God
reveals that he is the God of the oppressed, involved in
their history, liberating them from human bondage.

(2) Later stages of Israelite history also show that
God is particularly concerned about the oppressed
within the community of Israel. The rise of Old Testa-
ment prophecy is due primarily to the lack of justice
within that community. The prophets of Israel are
prophets of social justice, reminding the people that
Yahweh is the author of justice. It is important to note
in this connection that the righteousness of God is not
an abstract quality in the being of God, as with Greek
philosophy. It is rather God's active involvement in his-
try, making right what men have made wrong. The
consistent theme in Israelite prophecy is Yahweh's con-
cern for the lack of social, economic, and political jus-
tice for those who are poor and unwanted in the so-
ciety. Yahweh, according to Hebrew prophecy, will not
tolerate injustice against the poor; through his activity
the poor will be vindicated. Again, God reveals himself
as the God of liberation for the oppressed.

(3) In the New Testament, the Old Testament theme
of liberation is reaffirmed by Jesus himself. The conflict
with Satan and the powers, the condemnation of the
rich, the insistence that the Kingdom is for the poor,
and the locating of his ministry among the poor—these
and other features of the career of Jesus show that his
work was directed to the oppressed for the purpose of
their liberation. To suggest that he was speaking of a "spiritual" liberation fails to take seriously Jesus' thoroughly Hebrew view of man. Entering into the Kingdom of God means that Jesus himself becomes man's ultimate loyalty, for he is the Kingdom. This view of man's existence in the world has far-reaching implications for economic, political, and social institutions. They no longer can have ultimate claim on man's life; he is liberated and thus free to rebel against all powers that threaten man's life in the Kingdom. That is what Jesus had in mind when he said:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. (Luke 4:18–19)

In view of the biblical emphasis on liberation, it seems not only appropriate but necessary to define the Christian community as the community of the oppressed which Jesus Christ in his fight for the liberation of man. The task of theology then is to explicate the meaning of God's liberating activity so that those who labor under enslaving powers will see that the forces of liberation are the activity of God himself. Christian theology is never just a rational study of the being of God. Rather it is a study of God's liberating activity in the world, his activity on behalf of the oppressed.

The Content of Theology

If the history of Israel and the New Testament description of the historical Jesus reveal that God is a God who is identified with Israel because she is an oppressed community, the resurrection of Christ means that all oppressed peoples become his people. Herein lies the universal note implied in the gospel message of Jesus. The resurrection-event means that God's liberating work is not only for the house of Israel but for all who are enslaved by principalities and powers. The resurrection conveys hope in God. Now is this the "hope" that promises a reward in heaven in order to ease the pain of injustice on earth. Rather it is hope which focuses on the future in order to make men refuse to tolerate present inequities. To see the future of God, as revealed in his resurrection in Christ, is to see also the contradiction of any earthly injustice with existence in Christ. That is why César Chávez was right when he described revolutionary action as "a Christian, a priestly struggle." 1

The task of Christian theology, then, is to analyze the meaning of hope in God in such a way that the oppressed community of a given society will seek all for earthly freedom, a freedom made possible in the resurrection of Christ. The language of theology challenges the societal structures because it is inseparable from the suffering community. Theology can never be neu-

A Black Theology of Liberation

tral or fail to take sides on issues related to the plight of the oppressed. For this reason it can never engage in conversation about the nature of God without confronting those elements of human existence which threaten man’s existence as person. Whatever theology says about God and the world must arise out of its sole reason for existence as a discipline: to assist the oppressed in their liberation. Its language is always language about human liberation, proclaiming the end of bondage and interpreting the religious dimensions of the revolutionary struggle.

Liberation and Black Theology

Unfortunately, American white theology has not been involved in the struggle for black liberation. It has been basically a theology of the white oppressors, giving religious sanction to the genocide of Indians and the enslavement of black people. From the very beginning to the present day, American white theological thought has been “patriotic,” either by defining the theological task independently of black suffering (the liberal northern approach) or by defining Christianity as compatible with white racism (the conservative southern approach). In both cases theology becomes a servant of the state, and that can only mean death to black people. It is little wonder that an increasing number of black religious leaders find it difficult to be black and also to be identified with traditional theological thought forms.

The appearance of Black Theology on the American scene then is due exclusively to the failure of white religionists to relate the gospel of Jesus to the pain of being black in a white racist society. It arises from the need of black people to liberate themselves from white oppressors. Black Theology is a theology of liberation because it is a theology which arises from an identification with the oppressed blacks of America, seeking to interpret the gospel of Christ in the light of the black condition. It believes that the liberation of black people is God’s liberation.

The task of Black Theology then is to analyze the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of oppressed black people so they will see the gospel as inseparable from their humiliated condition, bestowing on them the necessary power to break the chains of oppression. This means that it is a theology of and for the black community, seeking to interpret the religious dimensions of the forces of liberation in that community.

There are two reasons why Black Theology is Christian theology and possibly the only expression of Christian theology in America. First, there can be no theology of the gospel which does not arise from an oppressed community. This is so because God in Christ has revealed himself as a God whose righteousness is inseparable

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from the weak and helpless in human society. The goal of Black Theology is to interpret God's activity as he is related to the oppressed black community.

Second, Black Theology is Christian theology because it centers on Jesus Christ. There can be no Christian theology which does not have Jesus Christ as its point of departure. Though Black Theology affirms the black condition as the primary datum of reality which must be reckoned with, this does not mean that it denies the absolute revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Rather it affirms it. Unlike white theology which tends to make the Christ-event an abstract, intellectual idea, Black Theology believes that the black community itself is precisely where Christ is at work. The Christ-event in twentieth-century America is a black-event, that is, an event of liberation taking place in the black community in which black people recognize that it is incumbent upon them to throw off the chains of white oppression by whatever means they regard as suitable. This is what God's revelation means to black and white America, and why Black Theology may be the only possible theology in our time.

It is to be expected that some persons will ask, "Why Black Theology? Is it not true that God is color blind? Is it not true that there are others who suffer as much, if not more in some cases than, black people?" These questions reveal a basic lack of understanding regarding Black Theology, and also a superficial view of the world at large. There are at least three points to be made here.

First, in a revolutionary situation there can never be just theology. It is always theology identified with a particular community. It is either identified with those who suffer oppression or with those who are its victims. A theology of the latter is authentic Christian theology, and an theology of the former is a theology of the Antichrist. Insofar as Black Theology is a theology arising from an identification with the oppressed black community and seeks to interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of the liberation of that community, it is Christian theology. American white theology is a theology of the Antichrist, insofar as it arises from an identification with the white community, thereby placing God's approval on white oppression of black existence.

Second, in a racist society, God is never color blind. To say God is color blind is analogous to saying that God is blind to justice and injustice, to right and wrong, in good and evil. Certainly this is not the picture of God revealed in the Old and New Testaments. Yahweh takes sides. On the one hand, he sides with Israel against the Canaanites as he makes her settlement in Palestine. On the other hand, he sides with the poor within the community of Israel against the rich and other political oppressors. In the New Testament, Jesus is not for all, but for the oppressed, the poor and un-
wanted of society, and against oppressors. The God of the biblical tradition is not uninvolved or neutral regarding human affairs; rather he is quite involved. He is active in human history, taking sides with the oppressed of the land. If God is not involved in human history, then all theology is useless, and Christianity itself is a mockery, a hollow, meaningless diversion.

The meaning of this message for our contemporary situation is clear: God, because he is a God of the oppressed, takes sides with black people. He is not color blind in the black-white struggle, but has made an unqualified identification with black people. This means that the movement for black liberation is the work of God himself, effecting his will among men.

Thirdly, there are, to be sure, many people who suffer, and they are not all black. Many white liberals receive a certain joy in reminding black militants that two thirds of the poor in America are white people. Of course one could observe that this means that the proportion of poor blacks is five times as great as that of poor whites, when we consider the total population of each group. But it is not our intention to debate white liberals on this issue, since it is not the purpose of Black Theology to minimize the suffering of others, including white people. Black Theology merely tries to discern the activity of the Holy One as he effects his purpose in the liberation of men from the forces of oppression. We must make decisions about where God is at work so we can join him in his fight against evil. But there is no perfect guide for discerning God's movement in the world. Contrary to what many conservatives would say, the Bible is not a blueprint on this matter. It is a valuable symbol for pointing to God's revelation in Christ, but it is not self-interpreting. We are thus placed in an existential situation of freedom in which the burden is on us to make the decision without a guaranteed ethical guide. This is the risk of faith.

For the black theologian: God is at work in the black community, vindicating black people against white oppression. It is impossible for him to be indifferent on this issue. Either God is for black people in their fight for liberation and against the white oppressors, or he is not. He cannot be both for us and for white oppressors at the same time.

In this connection we may observe that Black Theology takes seriously Paul Tillich's description of the symbolic nature of all theological speech. Man cannot describe God directly; he must use symbols that point to dimensions of reality that cannot be spoken of literally. Therefore to speak of Black Theology is to speak with the Tillichian understanding of symbol in mind. The focus on blackness does not mean that only blacks suffer as victims in a racist society, but that blackness is an ontological symbol and a visible reality which best describes what oppression means in America. The extermination of Indians, the persecution of the Jews,

the oppression of Mexican Americans, and every other conceivable inhumanity done in the name of God and country—these brutalities can be analyzed in terms of America’s inability to recognize humanity in persons of color. If the oppressed of this land want to challenge the oppressive character of white society, they must begin by affirming their identity in terms of that reality which is whiteness. Blackness, then, stands for all victims of oppression who realize that their humanity is inseparable from man’s liberation from whiteness.4

4 I do not intend to qualify this statement because too much is at stake—the survival of the black community. But perhaps some clarification is needed here. Some critics will undoubtedly ask, “How can you draw a line out of hand any criticism that white theologians or others in traditional white Christianity might raise concerning your interpretation of Black Theology, and at the same time, use quotations from white theologians, both European and American, with approval? If white theology is as bad as you say, why not divorce them altogether, without any reference to their work?” Of course, there are challenging questions, and I can use white people making this idea for all that it’s worth.

There are essentially two responses. First, those who press this point have taken too seriously the American definition of whiteness. When I say that white theology is not Christian theology, I mean that theology which has been written without any references to the oppressed of the land. This is true of Karl Barth and certainly not true of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Even Reinhold Niebuhr’s Moral Man and Immoral Society moves in the direction of blackness. To decide the blackness of a particular perspective, we need only ask, “For whom was it written, the oppressed or the oppressor?” If the former, it is black; if the latter, it is white. I do not condemn all men who happen to look like whites because the condemnation comes when they act like them.

Secondly, it is characteristic of oppression to be linked to the thought forms of those who call themselves the master. Oppression refers not only to economic, social and political disfranchisement; there is the disfranchisement of the mind, the spiritual and moral values that hold together man’s identity in a community. To be oppressed is to be defined, located or not seated according to another’s perspective. This is precisely what has happened to the black person in America. If he would be free, he must use the thought forms of the master and transform them into ideas of liberation. If the black man were not enslaved but clearly understood the meaning of his spirituality from his own vantage point, he would not be oppressed. The task of Black Theology is to take Christian traditions that is so white and make it black, by showing that the white man does not know really what he is saying when he affirms Jesus as the Christ. He who has been robbed of us is not white but black, and the redemption of which he speaks has nothing to do with stabilizing the status quo. It returns man to be what he is—a free creature.

With such a definition of blackness, we may see whiteness as the most adequate symbol for pointing to the dimensions of divine activity in America. And insofar as this country is seeking to make whiteness the dominating power throughout the world, whiteness is the symbol for the Antichrist. Whiteness symbolizes the activity of damaged men intrigued by their own image of themselves, and thus unable to see that they are what is wrong with the world. Black Theology seeks to analyze the satanic nature of whiteness and by doing so to prepare all nonwhites for revolutionary action.

In passing, it may be worthwhile to point out that white people are in no position whatever to question the legitimacy of Black Theology. Questions like “Do you think theology is black?” or “What about others who suffer?” are the product of minds incapable of black thinking. It is not surprising that the people who reject blackness in theology are usually whites who do not question the blue-eyed white Christ. It is impossible.
A Black Theology of Liberation

able to believe that white people are worried about Black Theology on account of its alleged alienation of other sufferers. The oppressor is not genuinely concerned about any oppressed group. It would seem rather that white rejection of Black Theology stems from a recognition of the revolutionary implications in the very phrase: a rejection of whiteness, an unwillingness to live under it, and an identification of whiteness with evil and blackness with good.

Black Theology and the Black Community

Most theologians agree that theology is a church discipline, i.e., a discipline which functions within the Christian community. This is one aspect which distinguishes theology from philosophy of religion. Philosophy of religion is not committed to a community; but it is an individual attempt to analyze the nature of ultimate reality through rational thought alone, using elements of many different religions to assist in the articulation of the ultimate.

Theology, by contrast, cannot be separated from the community which it represents. It assumes that truth has been given in the moment of the community’s birth. Its task is to analyze the implications of that truth, in order to make sure that the community remains committed to that which defines its existence. Theology is the community’s continued attempt to define in every generation its reason for being in the world. A community that does not analyze its existence theologically is a community that does not care what it says or does. It is a community which has no identity.

Applying this description, it is evident that white American theology has served the oppressor well. Throughout the history of this country, from the Puritans to the death-of-God theologians, the theological problems emanating from the white churches and theological schools are defined in such a manner that they are unrelated to the problem of being black in a white racist society. By defining the problems of Christianity independently of the black condition, white theology becomes a theology of white oppressors, serving as a divine sanction for criminal acts committed against black people. No white theologian has ever taken the oppression of black people as a point of departure for analyzing God’s activity in contemporary America. Apparently white theologians see no connection between whiteness and evil or blackness and God. Even those white theologians who try to write books about black people invariably fail to say anything relevant to the black community as it seeks to break the power of white racism. They usually think that writing books makes them experts on black humanity. As a result they are as arrogant as George Wallace in telling black people what is “best” for them. It is no surprise that the “best” is always the convenient way, the way least threatening to the political and social interests of the white majority.
Since white theology has consistently preserved the integrity of the community of oppressors, we conclude that it is not Christian theology at all. When we speak about God as he is related to men in the black-white struggle, Christian theology can only mean Black Theology, a theology that speaks of God as he is related to black liberation. If we agree that the gospel of God is the proclamation of God's liberating activity, that the Christian community is an oppressed community that participates in that activity, and that theology is that discipline arising from within the Christian community as it seeks to develop adequate language for its relationship to God's liberation, then Black Theology is Christian theology.

It is unthinkable that the oppressors could identify with oppressed existence and thus say something relevant about God's liberation of the oppressed. In order to be Christian theology, white theology must cease being white theology and become Black Theology by denying whiteness as a proper form of human existence.

The reader should take note of the two characteristics of the definition of blackness: first, blackness is a physiological trait. It refers to a particular black-skinned people in America who have been victims of white racist brutality. Those are the people who have the scars that bear witness to the inhumanity committed against them. Black Theology believes that they are the only bell that has opened the door to divine revelation. Therefore, an American theology can even tend in the direction of Christian theology without coming to terms with the black-skinned people of America. Secondly, blackness is an ontological symbol for all people who participate in the liberation of man from oppression. This is the universal note to Black Theology. It believes that all men were created for freedom, and that God always sides with the oppressed against the oppressors.

The Content of Theology

and affirming blackness as God's intention for humanity. White theologians will find this difficult, and it is to be expected that some will attempt to criticize Black Theology precisely at this point. Such criticism will not reveal the weakness in Black Theology but only the racist character of the critic.

Black Theology will not spend too much time trying to answer the critics because it is accountable only to the black community. Refusing to be separated from that community, Black Theology seeks to articulate the theological self-determination of black peoples, providing some ethical and religious categories for the black revolution in America. It says that all acts which participate in the destruction of white racism are Christian, the liberating deeds of God. All acts which impede the struggle of black self-determination—Black Power—are anti-Christian, the work of Satan.

The revolutionary situation forces Black Theology to shun all abstract principles dealing with what is the "right" and "wrong" course of action. There is only one principle which guides the thinking and action of Black Theology: an unqualified commitment to the black community as that community seeks to define its existence in the light of God's liberating work in the world. This means that Black Theology refuses to be guided by ideas and concepts alien to black people. It assumes that whites encounters black thought will judge it "irrational." Not understanding the oppressed condition, the oppressor is in no position to understand
the methods which the oppressed use to liberate. The logic of liberation is always incomprehensible to the slave masters. In the position of power, masters never understand what the slaves mean by "dignity." The only dignity they know is that of killing the slaves, as if their humanity depends on the enslavement of others. Black Theology does not intend to debate with whites who have this perspective. Speaking for the black community, Blank Theology says with Eldridge Cleaver, "We shall have our manhood. We shall have it, or the earth will be leveled by our attempts to gain it."

Black Theology as Survival Theology

To speak of Black Theology as survival theology refers to the condition of the community out of which Black Theology arises. We can delineate three characteristics of the black condition: the tension between life and death, identity crisis, and white social and political power.

1. The Tension between Life and Death. Black Theology is a theology of a community whose daily energies must be focused on physical survival in a hostile environment. The black community spends most of its time trying "to make a living" in a society labeled "for white only." Therefore, the central question for black people is "How are we going to survive in a world which deems black humanity as an illegitimate form of human existence?" That white America has issued the death warrant for being black is evident to the white brutality inflicted on black people. Though whites may protest that it is not so, the present ghettoes of this country say otherwise. The masters always pretend that they are not masters, insisting that they are only doing what is best for the society as a whole, including the slaves. This is, of course, the standard rhetoric of an oppressive society. The blacks know better. They know that whites have only one purpose: the destruction of everything which is not white. In this situation, blacks are constantly asking, often unanimously, "When will the white overlords decide that blackness in any form must be exterminated?" The genocide of the American Indian is a reminder to the black community that white people are capable of pursuing a course of complete annihilation of everything black. And the killing and the raping of black leaders makes us think that black genocide has already begun. It means that, from the white cop on his beat to the high government official, white people are not prepared for a real encounter with black reality, and thus the black community knows that whites may decide at any moment that the entire extermination of all blacks is indispensable to their existence as white people.

This is the context of "the tension between life and death." By white definitions whiteness is "being" and blackness is "nonbeing." For black people to affirm their being in this situation is to live under sentence of