

BLACK ECCLESIOLOGY IN THE WRITINGS OF JAMES H. CONE

by

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(Under the Direction of Sandy D. Martin)

ABSTRACT

This Thesis explores the writings of James H. Cone in regard to black ecclesiology and the theology of the black church as a reflection of the true gospel of Jesus Christ, which is a liberation theology. In his writings, Cone affirms the history of white supremacy and the systems of white politics and religion provided the impetus for the establishment and evolution of the black church founded on the principle that the gospel of Christ is necessarily a black gospel in that it parallels the struggles and liberation of an oppressed people.

INDEX WORDS: black ecclesiology, black theology, black church, white supremacy,
liberation, gospel, Christ, oppression, freedom

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To my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ through him all this was accomplished, and to my loving parents Willie James Moore and Mary Virginia Moore for all your love, support and belief in me, it has all been made possible.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCING THE LIFE AND THOUGHT OF JAMES H. CONE

When we assess the gospel of Christ, it must be interpreted from a theological perspective of liberation of the poor and oppressed. This is the Hermeneutical assumption of Dr. James H Cone. in relation to Black ecclesiology in the writings of James H Cone. The nature of this project looks at the historical development of the black ecclesiology in American history. It is significant in defining how black American ecclesiology has developed in its evolution in the Americas under a system of acute institutionalized racism and oppression that gave white Americans a false entitlement of right and superiority rooted in the natural evolution of the species, and perpetuated by white racist heretical twisting of scripture and hermeneutics in the white church. Black people were naturally deemed inferior where by white theology of the gospel was used to perpetuate, and sell this racist theology to black people in America from slavery to freedom. A black ecclesiology began under the intuition of slavery in the antebellum South that caused the old southern black American slave to ask what did we do? Thesis is also significant in the establishment of black theological scholarship in relational to black scholars the world over as well as Dr. James Cone in the scholarly establishment of the theological perspective of the sacred text we call the Bible. The Biblical text that blacks in the Americas read has always been presented form the European and White American theological perspective's and in commentaries. Therefore, blacks in the Americas have primarily been exposed to theological interpretations of the Bible from the European and white Americans historical and culture

context leaving a void of black theological interpretative analysis insight in to the gospel of Christ, and how it relates to black humanity and all its struggles. This is a question that would resonate for generations to come in America into the modern era of the black church. How does this gospel relate to black humanity and the image white Christ? Black ecclesiology sprang forth from the interior of the tribal struggles and wars on the African continent, as white slave catchers and local African help gathered Africans for transport to the Americas. The black ecclesiology began to be formulated aboard slave ships that departed the West African coast for the Americas. The fight to resist oppression and serve the creator in relation to one's own cultural and ancestral heritage was demonstrated on the slave ship. There was a struggle for liberation on those ships, and that struggle would continue as Africans landed at the slave auction blocks in the Americas, and taken to plantations throughout the Americas for a life time of human bondage. The rise of the slave religion in North America as white Christian missionaries began to preach the gospel to slaves was the beginning of black ecclesiology and black theological inquiry that called for the slave to ask why. One does not always have to be literate to ponder one's natural human curiosity about origins of life, and who gave life to the universe. to Are we not like the Hebrew Israelites of ancient Egypt whom Moses brought up out of the bondage to liberation? Black ecclesiology and theology was in the making within the structure of America's chattel slavery that debased one's humanity, and subjected the enslaved to shame, degradation and destruction of one's ancestral identity.

Black ecclesiology and black theological inquiry would be formulated in the hush harbors under the institution of slavery. The black slave preacher literate and illiterate would began to rewrite the gospel form a black African –America historical perspective. This black ecclesiology and black theology would develop for centuries under the influence of European and white

America androcentric culture of racism, classism and sexism. The White church would help to shape and facilitate black ecclesiology and theology out of the institutionalized racism that existed in the white culture and white church. The white church theology validated the humanity and existence of the Whiteman and simultaneously disengaged the total historical and cultural relevancy of black humankind, and there was the image of the white Christ that would serve as an important tool in white religion and racism to accomplish this political agenda. The white Christianity and its white Christ was also facilitate racism through the white church through white theology a religious identity marker. The white Christ supported by white theology and the white church made the white race naturally superior. The racism of separate but equal was founded in the white America church, born out of the old white European secular and ecclesial society. Whites and slaves would attend the same church in the antebellum South as well as the North. Blacks and whites North and South in America prayed and sang and worshipped the same God within the white church establishment supporting the institution of slavery, and racism which is incompatible to the liberating gospel of Christ. Black ecclesiology and theology had its making and roots in this historical context that would give strong voice to the Dr. James H. Cone black theological and hermeneutical analysis of scripture and black ecclesiology. This thesis examines the history of Black ecclesiology in the writings of James H. Cone. Chapter one looks at the early life of James Cone form his early Childhood in the Jim Crow South of separate, but equal and how it shaped Cones theological thoughts and future as major black theological voice in America culture. Chapter two examines ecclesiology in the thoughts and writings of Dr. Cone as Dr. Cone affirms ecclesiology and the nature and character of what he considers to be the true church. In chapter three Cone gives a definitive analysis of the white church and its theology in its support and tolerance of institutionalized racism in America from its infancy which would

facilitate the development of the black ecclesiology in the Americas. One is inclined to take a closer look at the true gospel of Christ in relation to Christ true mission and the theology of the cross. Dr. Cone reassesses the nature of the white church in America, and he affirms a spirit that has been present in the white church that is antithetical to the gospel of Christ. Cone asserts that the white church is more in line of that of the antichrist rather than Christ the Messiah. In chapter four Dr. Cone gives his theological analysis and assessment of the black church from slavery to emancipation, Jim Crow, the lynching era, the Civil Rights movement to modern day America. It is a black church that is in need of redefining in its own organizational mission, purpose and theological context. It the black power element of solidarity that Cone asserts in black ecclesiology. One must have an understanding of one's own ancestral heritage, culture and origins. There needs to be a theology rooted in the black struggle of the Americas with a self-assessment analysis of the black church strengths and weaknesses so that your church theology is the theology of the liberating Christ and not a theology of one's own making and political agenda. In the fifth and final chapter there is synergism of thoughts and writings s of James H. Cone in the ecclesiology of the black church. It is a reflection of what has been learned in reference to the liberating gospel of Christ, the true nature of the church as Christ ordained it to be, and the true spirit of Christ in relation to the poor and oppressed. Cone redefines the theological perspective of the gospel of Christ from the existence of black humanity in the Americas. One can look at the Christ event of the cross from the perspective of the black man's event on the lynching tree in North America. In so doing, Dr. Cone vehemently shapes a strong black theological and liberating hermeneutical analysis of the gospel and reshapes the image of Christ on the cross that encourages one to reconsider the gospel, and the Christ figure that is relational to the struggles of African-American peoples in the Americas.

James H. Cone was a pragmatic African-American liberation theologian. He was born August 05, 1936 in Fordyce, Arkansas and died April 28, 2018 at the age of eighty-one. James H. Cone's personhood, along with his cultural, socio-political, and theological ideology was formulated by his strong black southern religious upbringing. In addition, Cone's Christian family values, his solid identity as a black American male, and his unbreakable connection with African-American culture contributed to the development of a his character and theology. Growing up in Bearden, Arkansas under the influence of his parents, both members of the Macedonia AME Church, Cone's intellect and theological passions began to take shape into a guiding force in Cone's life.¹ Bearden, Arkansas circa early- to mid-twentieth century hosted an iron cast class system of racial oppression and separation. White oppression brought the cruel reality of Black racial oppression to horrific new levels, which spawned an uncrushable, sustaining faith into the development of a strong sense of identity as a black American. James Cone, in the midst of this nightmare, experienced the inner turmoil as many of his contemporaries. This anxiety and tension within Cone's inner being would remained unresolved for years. He would question the goodness of God in the face of the many sufferings that racial oppression imparted on black people in America. Despite his youthful innocence, his questions regarding the injustices he experienced in Bearden would lead him into mature contemplations and fuel his budding passion for liberation theology for many years to come. Cone would discuss with his fellow brother the plight of black America and the depth of suffering in relation to Christianity and faith.² He viewed this plight of black America and its ongoing suffering as a need for philosophical theological inquiry. This

¹ James Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* ((Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 17–18.

²James Cone,*My Soul Looks Back*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986, 17–18.

internalized and lingering question of the suffering of black Americans would continue to fuel his passion, faith, and life for the ministry, as it was all determined and formulated in Bearden, Arkansas. White oppression of black America throughout the South created a personal reality, as Cone describes, of lynchings, rapes, and police brutality, all of which became a personal part of his world and existence even though he never suffered such humiliations. Cone resented the presumptuous attitudes of the whites in their social ethos. The "black-white social arrangement" debased black people in the south and sent them to the rear, which constantly created a contemptable and dehumanizing white racist cultural arrangement for white supremacy.³

James H. Cone deeply resented what appeared to be an unchangeable iron system of acute racism—the ruling social and political structure of the day in the South. Nevertheless, Cone refused to accept this unjust system as a part of the natural cultural development of any nation of people. He recognized the voice from within himself that vehemently cried out to resist all forms of oppression. His father had provided an exemplary life of black male personhood. All that encompasses passions, feelings, and meaning in Cone's writings and purpose sprang forth from his father. As Cone admits, "My father was such a dominant person in the lives of his three sons that even today we still talk about his courage and integrity in difficult circumstances."⁴

The influence of Cone's father and Cone's observations of his father's social interactions with black and white Americans instilled in Cone a personal conviction: Black Americans should never expect white America to deal fairly and honorably with any black Americans. As Cone questioned, "How could they treat us justly when they do not regard us as people?"⁵ His faith in Christ would send him into a journey for answers.

³James Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986, 18–19.

⁴James Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986, 19.

⁵James Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 20.

Cone's faith in the righteousness of God was strengthened within the religious culture of the Macedonia African Methodist Episcopal Church. This church would also facilitate Cone's resistance to white oppression. Cone saw the elements of Marxists theology as being the foundation of the white church but antithetical to the existence of religion for black people as he experienced it in Bearden, Arkansas. For Cone, religion served as forces of transformative black identity, empowerment, and freedom apart from white America. The black church was a life giving force in the midst of white oppression when all a realities was shrouded in uncertainty for black American people. The black church and the God,whom Cone found there, was away for all black Americans to affirm black humanity and the black cultural identity despite the institutionalized racism that depreciated the existence of black people in America. Cone postulated that "how were they to know that they were somebody when their humanity was not recognized by the existing arrangement, and when it appeared that they were powerless to do anything about it?"⁶The roots of Black religion must be evaluated in this context as Cone had analyzed it within the black church experience in Bearden, Arkansas.

The degrading and dehumanizing treatment that black Americans continuously experienced reduced black people to objects of things rather than accepting them as humans. The black church experience on any given day redefined that treatment, thereby serving as the perfect antidote proclaiming their humanity. The black church created the black deacons, ushers, teachers, ministers, chairmen and the choir president that was absent from America-at-large. At Macedonia African Methodist Episcopal, there were not any *nobodies*. From the perspective of the Marxist and leftist, the resilience of black people through the black religious experience was the embodiment of the opiate effect in black people's survival in America. The black church and

⁶James Cone,*My Soul Looks Back* ((Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 22–23

its religion were the symbols and embodiment of liberation in the struggle for freedom and equality.

As a child Cone witnessed the fight for racial equality conducted within the black church by many black ministers and leaders, which led Cone himself to pursue a ministerial vocation with the black theology of liberation as the principle focus of his theological perspective.⁷ Cone's desire to understand the conflicting forces in America in regards to blacks and whites fueled his intellectual curiosity, which directed him to Shorter and Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Arkansas where he began to increase in knowledge and wisdom in regards to societal concerns. Cone did not think he was prepared emotionally or academically for the major white colleges, which is why he entered Shorter and Philander Smith at that time. The black churches, black schools, and his family teachings and values would shape his personhood and open the door to his future as a professor of theology at a major American seminary school.⁸

Cone's intellectual curiosity spurred him to be a reader and advocate of Socrates, Plato, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, Immanuel Kant, and G. W. F. Hegel. Negro History was a major area of study for Cone along with the rich tradition of the black culture and the black church. Cone was black in that Cone was identifiably black in his personhood and proud to have been born black and to be a minister in a black church. An absence of knowledge about one's own people and cultural heritage makes it difficult to have an inner feeling of self-worth in a rigidly racist society. Lack of identity, that is, lack of knowledge of one's cultural heritage leaves one vulnerable to attack. Within such an acutely racist system, such as the one Cone was experiencing in the world in which he lived and worked, the oppressor can transform a person into whatever is expedient for the oppressor. Cone's passion to become who he was destined to

⁷James Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986, 24–5.

⁸James Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986, 26–7.

become by way of his black identity and culture would serve as a means to thwart these intentions.

Blacks' contributions to the making of civilization was excluded from the teachings of whites in white institutions, thereby creating a greater void of nothingness in the minds of black Americans. This void included the internal struggle black America faced being told they had made no significant contribution intellectually, scientifically, economically, politically or theological to the advancement of civilization. This perpetuated the belief among many blacks that they needed white Americans to think for them. For this reason, Cone's participation in society was marginalized.⁹

Acquiring knowledge in the area of black history in regards to men like Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Dubois, and Carter G. Woodson exposed the many ways in which Cone learned black resistance to white Supremacy. Cone would find in his studies that history included a vibrant spirit and courage of black Americans. His discoveries in black history would become a source of liberation for James H. Cone. In learning about the past, Cone gained insight as to how to evaluate the present and formulate a formidable plan to facilitate a better future.¹⁰

Cone was inspired to study religion and philosophy as majors. These disciplines demeaned intellectual reasoning, logical thought processes, and oral skills when engaging in intellectual debate. This was all the natural processes of Cone's personhood. James H. Cone entered Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois in 1958, where acute racism and dehumanizing attitudes of white towards black Americans in the world caused Cone to wrestle with faith and social injustice. Cone was told that "niggers" were not served at the Barbershop he entered in Evanston, Illinois not far from the school he would later attend. Cone's

⁹James Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986, 28.

¹⁰James Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986, 29.

experience with white Christians in the South and North, as well as many other forms of racism, led Cone to resolve that it was unrealistic for black Americans to expect equal treatment from white people in any location in America. He wrestled with the fact that American history itself that involved blacks' participation—the War of Independence, the War of 1812, the Civil War and two World Wars—did not change the plight of black Americans, nor did it earn black Americans an equal footing alongside white Americans. Black religion would be the source of change and faith where white America would eventually meet black America on an equal footing.¹¹

James Cone's central focus became systematic theology and its relation to black people's struggle and oppression in the fight for freedom and equality in society. As Cone entered Garrett-Northwestern Ph.D. program, the study of systematic theology, Christian Ethics, became the conduit to evaluating the social issues of racism in relation to systematic theology. Racism discussion was not an issue that was included in the theological perspective and analysis at a school like Garrett-Northwestern. Cone undertook the writing of a dissertation on Karl Barth's anthropology.¹²

The persistent environment of institutionalized and intellectual systemic bigotry at Garrett-Northwestern fueled Cone's intellectual growth and inquiry. In absence of a black American theological perspective, the theological perspective of the gospel of Jesus was consumed and defined by white-American and European theology. Where is the connection between the theological perspectives of Barth, Tillich, and Brunner in relation to the black struggle? Cone experienced the conflict of racism and the theology of Christ with deep internal turmoil. Cone's racist professor of Christian ethics, dehumanizing racist jokes in class, along

¹¹James Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 30–1.

¹²James Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 36–7.

with the absence in study of black religious scholars' perspectives at Garret-Northwestern groomed the black liberation and black theology theologian with an earned Ph.D. The same racist professor would end up refusing a simple congratulatory hand-shake at the commencement exercise.¹³

James H. Cone's theology is Black theology and Black liberation in identification with the true gospel of Christ in relation to the liberation of the oppressed worldwide. *Black Theology* is a phenomenon of the 1960s. It is the religious counterpart of the more secular movement called "black power." This means that black theology is a religious explication of black people's need to define the scope and meaning of black existence in a white racist society. Black power focuses on the political, social, and economic condition of black people, seeking to define concretely the meaning of black self-determination in a society that has placed definite limits on black humanity. Black Theology puts black identity into a theological context, showing that black power is not only consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ, but that it *is* the gospel of Jesus Christ."¹⁴

Cone defines black theology in the rediscovery of one's historical heritage that was deliberately destroyed by the system of white supremacy, and the reshaping of one's current social, political, and economic status. This is cemented through one's own cultural empowerment to abolish and break the strongholds and effects of the oppressor's racist ideology holding one in blind bondage. Black theology redefines the past historical events and current activities and action within our present time. The agenda is rooted in liberation with a theological perspective and context. In black theology, foreign false gods must be destroyed and a cultural

¹³ James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore, eds. *Theology: A Documentary History, Volume 1: 1966–1979* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 36–8.

¹⁴ Cone and Wilmore, 1993, 106.

and legitimate system of values aligned with the one true “God of Black freedom” must be formed.¹⁵

Black theology is further defined in the conceptualization that the Gospel of Christ is humankind’s liberation. Therefore, James H. Cone does not legitimize any Christian language that negates the righteousness of God in the revelation of God’s liberation of the poor, oppressed, suffering, and outcast. He expounds, “To speak of the God of Christianity is to speak of him who has defined himself according to the liberation of the oppressed.”¹⁶ Christian theology functionality evaluates the true meaning of God’s methodology of liberation, “In the light of Jesus Christ, showing that all actions that make for freedom of man are indeed he actions of God. Herein lies the heart of black theology’s perspective on the theological task.”¹⁷

The two major points of Cone’s theology is biblical history and black liberation; it is here where one arrives at the true meaning and substance of Cone’s theology in God’s ultimate plan for the liberation of the oppressed, poor, and downtrodden. Biblical history itself attests to the very actions of the God of Israel on behalf of humankind’s salvation.¹⁸ God is the active agent in human history to provide humankind’s salvation through divine activity. In regards to oppression caused by white supremacy, salvation is interpreted as those who believe in Christ. As a result, it is taken as an element of “divine justice” supposedly making them more ideal citizens and faithful believers. The eyes of the white oppressors does not account for the societal forces of politics, economics, and other factors along humanity’s journey as relevant to salvation. White oppressors see salvation as a personal work ultimately to support status quo, including laws regardless of injustice the laws may represent. From this perspective, no real Christian comes

¹⁵ James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume 1:1966-1979*, eds. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 109.

¹⁶ Cone and Wilmore, 1993, 109–10.

¹⁷ Cone and Wilmore, 1993, 109–10.

¹⁸ Cone and Wilmore, 1993, 110.

against the state and the system as it is. This perspective of the white supremacists of salvation is antithetical to true biblical history, a dangerous misalignment that “identifies God with the oppressors, giving political and religious approval to the oppression of man.”¹⁹

In the Old Testament, God proclaims his righteous and justice for the oppressed in divine activity that liberates his people. The writings of Moses reveal, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore 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 peoples.”²⁰ In God’s divine activity of appointment, he proclaims his righteousness for those that are poor and oppressed. The salvation for the oppressed is defined by God’s ultimate deliverance of them.²¹

Biblical history validates further in the New Testament God’s divine and liberating activity for the oppressed where Jesus directly identifies with the poor and outcasts of his time. His arrival on the face of the earth and deliverance of the oppressed was the centrality of his purpose for having been born into the world. When Jesus proclaims, “The Last shall be first and the first shall be last,”²² he intimates liberation of the oppressed. He embraced the traitor, the sinner, and the adulterers, as well as the Samaritan. He rebuked the religious elite of his day and shocked them by proclaiming that the otherwise persecuted people of society, such as tax collector and harlots, would enter into his kingdom before any of them.²³ To embrace the mentality of the ruling class and religious elite of that time would have resulted in a dismissal of

¹⁹James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume 1:1966-1979*.eds. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 110.

²⁰ Exodus 19:4–5, KJV Bible

²¹ Cone and Wilmore, 1993, 110–11.

²² Matt. 20:16, KJV Bible

²³ Matt. 21:31, KJV Bible

the poor and oppressed. This religious elite mind-set opposed the true sovereign God because it sought to destroy the dignity and personhood of the poor and oppressed.

In God's economy, the oppressed must rely on God and cannot depend on receiving anything of this worldly system of exploitation. The systems of this world favor the rich without regard for freedom. Therefore, the oppressed that commit to a worldly system cannot expect to be welcomed into God's kingdom. The oppressed must refuse and renounce the worldly system to be free. Poverty is not a prerequisite for salvation; however, the poor must wait on God's liberating activity of deliverance rather than succumb to the systems of this world and its false gods.²⁴

One cannot embrace the theology of Christ and support the oppression and bondage of one's brothers and sisters. Cone and Wilmore explain, "For Christ, salvation is not an eschatological longing for escape to a transcendent reality: neither is it an inward serenity which eases unbearable suffering."²⁵ God embraces humankind in the depth of his misery and oppression and liberates humankind from his own evils.²⁶

Black liberation functionality is rooted in adherence and service to the needs within the church. The theological perspective is tasked with defining the truth of the Christian gospel and the accurate interpretation of that truth in all generations thereafter. Cone reiterates the thoughts of Paul Tillich in the task of theology if the truth of the gospel is God's liberation that centers on the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the divine guarantee that he who is Father, son and Holy Spirit has taken upon himself the oppressed condition of all people, then Theology must ask: What is the significance of this message for our time? In what ways can we best explicate the meaning of

²⁴ Cone and Wilmore, 1993, 111.

²⁵ Cone and Wilmore, 1993, 111.

²⁶ Cone and Wilmore, 1993, 111.

God's liberating activity in the world so that the oppressed will be ready to risk all for earthly freedom?"²⁷

Because liberation is an essential component of the Christian gospel, particularly in the current time we live as well as in the past, one comes to the realization that the Christian gospel in the United States is black. In a nation where people are dehumanized because of the color of one's skin, the theological perspective of the gospel within such a nation will take theological perspectives in relation to those victims of oppression in relation to race. This is incompatible with the theology of Jesus Christ who sent to liberate the oppressed. Blackness has been categorized as ugly and ungodly. As Cone and Wilmore explain, "Christians must glorify it [blackness] because the oppressors despise it, must love it because the oppressors hate it."²⁸ This is the best way to say to hell with white supremacy; it is not compatible with the liberating God who saves.²⁹

James H. Cone's theology of Black theology and liberation was revolutionary in the thoughts of Gayraud Wilmore. The contribution of Cone's theology to the church and to religious academic circles caused Christians of the church and religious scholars alike to reconsider how Christianity and theology have been traditionally defined. Reactions were facilitated among Christians within the white community and Jews alike. Cone's theology initiated a new theological movement, and opened a new door in the field of study for all legitimate students of religion. The tone was set for the reconfiguration of theology in Christianity and its interpretation within both the true universal church and all religious academic institutions. Cone's book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, sounded the trumpet of a radical contextual liberation theology in North America, a new school of thought in "methodology and

²⁷ Cone and Wilmore, 1993, 111.

²⁸ Cone and Wilmore, 1993, 112.

²⁹ Cone and Wilmore, 1993, 112.

social action” for which most people were not prepared.³⁰ Cones’ theology was not fully understood by everyone in either the black or white religious establishments of churches and academic institutions, and this made it difficult to embrace and expedite.³¹

Nevertheless, Cone’s new black theological perspective eventually began to facilitate advancement of thought among black American theologians. It has since gained considerable attention and prestige in American seminary schools and major universities in the field of religion. However, ministers of the more traditional religious congregations have not fully embraced Cone’s theology, primarily due to a lack of understanding.

In 1970, the creation of “The Society for the Study of Black Religion” was necessary for the accreditation of research and teaching in the field of black theology.”³² This has led to a large number of men and women in black religious denominations and churches to become scholars in black theology. In graduate studies at some of America’s best seminary schools, great emphasis has been placed on the necessity of advance studies in the African-American religious field. Still, there remains a lack of urgency among many traditional Christian communities to embrace Cone’s theology. However, Cone’s liberation theology has made significant impact in the Roman Catholic Church and among the poor in Latin America.³³

³⁰ Cone and Wilmore, 1993, 146.

³¹ Cone and Wilmore, 1993, 146.

³² Cone and Wilmore, 1993, 158.

³³ Cone and Wilmore, 1993, 158–95.

CHAPTER 2

ECCLESIOLOGY IN THE THOUGHT OF JAMES H. CONE

Cone and Wilmore define the church as “that people called into being by the power and love of God to share in his revolutionary activity for the liberation of man.”³⁴ Further, Cone affirms that the theology of the church is “consistent with the person and work of Jesus Christ.”³⁵ Race or different classes of people with certain occupations do not identify the Church, nor is the church a specific building or an imposing manmade institution. The church cannot be defined by roles and titles of the leaders within, such as bishops or ministers. The church is the abundance of God’s people that are suffering, poor, and oppressed, those most inclined to adhere to the words and teachings of Jesus Christ. As Matthew’s gospel records the words of Jesus, “Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”³⁶ Cone vehemently affirms the words of Bonhoeffer that the “call of God constitutes the church, and it is a call to suffering.”³⁷

Humankind is tasked with enduring suffering along with the divine heavenly father. Humankind must endure a life in a sinful world without trying cover up the ugly in fullness of our world with an eloquent practice of religion in an attempt to transform the ungodliness. The confession of being religious does not quantify one as being a true Christian. The rigid practice of any form of asceticism or religious practice and ceremony does not equate to true sainthood.

³⁴ Cone and Wilmore, 1993, 67.

³⁵ Cone, 1986, 70.

³⁶ Matt. 5:11, KJV Bible

³⁷ Cone and Wilmore, 1993, 68.

Rather, it is the active “participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world” that is the true Christian experience.³⁸ The true church is where people will find Christ among the impoverished, oppressed, downtrodden, poor, and enslaved. Therefore, the church can be found in the ghetto of oppression and suffering where Christ is always. The church cannot be defined in simple attendance on a routine basis where sacraments are performed and routine preaching prevails. It is essential in defining the church for all to understand that “Christ was not crucified on an altar between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves.”³⁹ Christ is not in those serene and “comfortable suburban churches, but in the Ghetto fighting the racism of churchly white people.”⁴⁰

In her book *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Delores S. Williams supports James H. Cone’s definition of the church as “the suffering of God in the life in the world.”⁴¹ Williams refers to this as *the horizontal and vertical encounter*. In the horizontal encounter, “the social interactions between black and white Americans throughout history to current times can be seen in a very negative socio-historical context,” which is a normative element of African-American culture and community.⁴² In the vertical encounter, there is a merging between the divine and his suffering creation. This vertical encounter facilitates various cultural traditions and practices known as religion. Those that are the oppressed experience a spiritual transformative process of mind, body, and soul that creates conditions of freedom and liberation. Delores Williams confirms and asserts Cone’s thoughts, an epistemological process that she deems essential for black theologians. Williams comments on Cone’s early works, that

³⁸ Cone and Wilmore, 1993, 68–9.

³⁹ Cone and Wilmore, 1993, 69.

⁴⁰ Cone and Wilmore, 1993, 69.

⁴¹ Cone and Wilmore, 1993, 69.

⁴² Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 154.

“a life of humiliation and suffering . . . the totality of black existence in a white world where babies are tortured, women are raped and men are shot. This is the black existence in a system of white racism.”⁴³ This is Christ and the church suffering together.⁴⁴

James H. Cone’s definition of the church also aligns with the words of Carl Michalson, which state, “Christian gospel is a proclamation which strikes the ear of the world with the force of a hint. Some get it; some do not. To those who do, it is the power of God unto salvation. To those do not, it can seem a scandal and offense.”⁴⁵ Therefore, the church includes those Christian individuals within the body of Christ that heed to the hint and will not be silent within the Christian community in the face of human suffering and oppression. It is impossible for the true members of the church who have received the gift and power of salvation to remain silent as neighbors are thrown into prison camps. Cone confirms the gospel compels the true church to stand up against oppression, saying, “If our brothers and sisters go, it will be over our dead bodies.”⁴⁶

Personal freedom and liberation of the oppressed takes precedence over adhering to laws and maintaining order. In Nazi Germany, Adolf Hitler sent millions of Jews to their deaths using the prevailing rule of law as their measuring rod. American politicians have spoken language with a similar tone, proclaiming,

The streets of our country are in turmoil. The universities are filled with students rebelling and rioting. Communists are seeking to destroy our country. Russia is threatening us with her might and the republic is in danger. Yes, danger from within and from without. We need law and order. Yes, without law and our nation cannot survive.

⁴³ Williams, 1993, 154–5.

⁴⁴ Cone and Wilmore, 1993, 69.

⁴⁵ Cone, 2010, 137.

⁴⁶ Cone, 2010, 137.

Elect us and we will restore law and order. We shall by law and order be respected among the nations of the world. Without law and order our republic shall fail.⁴⁷

Cone emphasizes that the church is the liberating life force in the world through Jesus Christ; therefore, the church cannot support any oppressive system of laws that facilitates suffering among humanity. The church should facilitate a revolutionary, community effort to abolish oppressive laws that destroy human lives. Cone asserts, the church “believes with Reinhold Niebuhr that comfortable classes may continue to dream of an automatic progress in society. They do not endure the sufferings of the inequality and societal injustices enough to identify with it. The community of the church believers are the rightful heirs to God’s promises of the inequality and injustice to identify with the injustice.”⁴⁸

Cone defines three functionalities of the church (ecclesia) from the perspective of the New Testament within the community filled with the Holy Spirit of God and commissioned by the truth of the gospel. Because church believers experience humanity in all its sufferings, the church cannot be silent and support the world structure of oppression as it stands. The church has a duty to revolt against the structural evils of society to unite all of humanity against those societal laws of oppression. God’s active divine intervention to liberate the oppressed is a historical and a defining element of the church. Threefold functionality of the church is to proclaim the eternal spirit of God is humanity’s liberation through teaching and preaching the gospel. God’s divine liberation and the preaching of the gospel for the liberation of the oppressed was revealed in the humanity of Jesus’ life and in the abiding presence and gift of the Holy Spirit. Cone stresses that the good news of God’s liberating gospel must be shared with the rest of the world. Cone believes scripture mandates this sharing, citing, “Go therefore and make

⁴⁷ Cone, 2010, 137–8.

⁴⁸ Cone, 2010, 138.

disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”⁴⁹

When people preach the gospel, they are informing the world of how the gospel relates to the freedom that resides within being a Christian. Cone explains, “It means telling blacks that their slavery has come to an end, and telling whites to let go of the chains.”⁵⁰ He further reiterates that blacks in America should not allow themselves to live by the standards of white America because it is the gospel of God that is black America’s salvation; therefore, black America’s concern and loyalty should be directed toward the divine. To this end, Cone warns, “Preaching the gospel is nothing but proclaiming to blacks that they do not have to submit to ghetto-existence.”⁵¹ The higher commitment to God crosses all planes of human dimensions. The blood of the lamb, Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, has purchased the existence of black people. It is essential for black Americans to function as a free nation of people.⁵²

In the church’s mission in spreading the gospel of Christ, it also actively participates with the oppressed in the ongoing struggle of total liberation. In Jesus’ death and resurrection, he won the battle against the evils of the oppressors in the world. However, this victory once proclaimed by Jesus is not recognized by the oppressive rulers of today because they continue to function as if they are all-powerful. The laws of an age order remain intact. It is the duty and mission of the church to remind the ruling factions that they are not all-powerful. Rather, those that are behind

⁴⁹ Matthew 28:19–20, KJV Bible

⁵⁰ Cone, 2010, 139.

⁵¹ Cone, 2010, 139.

⁵² Cone, 2010, 139.

will become first and those that are ahead will become last. Cone proclaims, “A Copernican revolution has taken place in human existence that transcends anything past or present.”⁵³

The church makes the issues of economic, politics, and society an intricate part of the gospel throughout the community. The church must be in opposition with society’s power elites because the church’s primary mission is to participate with Christ in his liberating methodology throughout the world.⁵⁴

In regards to black people, societal and cultural values are nonessential. Black Americans should take its liberation in a partnership with the rests of the world, which will make the world more understanding and in tune with what it is means to be black The church is that culture of believers that will awaken the world to “black self-determination by forcing rulers to decide between blackness and death.”⁵⁵

In effect, the church is a physical manifestation of the living reality of the gospel of Christ. It must be free in its entire purpose and nature because with its freedom the representation of the kingdom of God would be grossly distorted. If the church exists by the standards and rules of the old established order from its onset until current, then the message that is sent forth from the church will not be believed as truth by anyone. “If someone tells me that Christ has set us free from all alien,” explains Cone, “but he himself obeys the loyalties that he claims Christ has defeated, then I must conclude that he does not really believe what he says.”⁵⁶ True belief in the church will reflect in the lives of those that claim such belief, evidenced by the preaching that takes place within the church. Cone agrees with Bonhoeffer on this wise, that the church is

⁵³ Cone, 2010, 139.

⁵⁴ Cone, 2010, 139.

⁵⁵ Cone, 2010, 139.

⁵⁶ Cone, 2010, 140.

“Christ existing as a community.”⁵⁷ Therefore, Cone affirms, that the task of the church is to become black in its identification with the suffering Christ and bear the humiliations and shame that white society has placed on black humanity. In addition, Cone claims that which is categorized as shameful in our world has the element of holiness in the eyes of God. This holiness is with black humankind. Cone states, “Black is holy, that is, it is a symbol of God’s presence in history on behalf of the Oppressed man.”⁵⁸

Furthermore, Cone expresses that where the presence of black humanity is, one can expect to find Christ because Christ was the embodiment of the oppressed: Christ took on blackness so that what is evil in man’s eyes might become good.”⁵⁹ Cone concludes that the oppressed Christ is black and that his oppression is the result of his blackness. It is the duty and mission of the church to be in the midst of those who are oppressed. This is the substance of the service of reconciliation. Unfortunately, Cone laments, the traditional church takes a passive, silent, and peaceful accommodation toward societal racism, when, instead, it should help the oppressor to recognize black humanity as being human too. Cone confirms that reconciliation requires actions that result in a revolution, and everyone must be asked the question, *What side are you taking?*

The church in no way accommodates a racist ideology as “Christ has broken down the walls of hostility.”⁶⁰ Cone affirms Karl Barth’s thoughts on the substance and functionality of the church when Barth affirmed, “the church as God’s subjective realization of atonement.”⁶¹ Therefore, it necessitates that the Church must represent the kingdom of God in its manifestation on earth. The church is tasked with the ongoing question, “Who in the community

⁵⁷ Cone, 2010, 140.

⁵⁸ Cone, 1969, 69.

⁵⁹ Cone, 1969, 69.

⁶⁰ Eph. 2:14 KJV

⁶¹ Cone, 1969, 69.

does not live according to the spirit of Christ?”⁶² Cone affirms that this question was essential for Christians such as the Anabaptist in the sixteenth century, and it remains an important question in any era. In reference to this question and affirming its importance of what the question is asking, Cone makes reference to Barth and Bonhoeffer. Barth comments, “The church which is not deeply disturbed by it is not a Christian church. It cannot be Christ existing as community or ‘Christ’s presence in history,’ as Bonhoeffer would put it, without being seriously concerned about the holiness of its members.”⁶³

By asking questions like this, believers affirm their Christian journey. When the true church embodies the essence of Christ in this world, then humanity has become the true Christian. The true church clarifies the Christ event in the world so that all members within the church will understand God’s action through Christ, and members of the church learn the true mission of the church. Members of the church must have a clear understanding of the true nature and existence of the church and the church’s purpose. In the final analysis of what constitutes the church, Cone reveals, “The church must be a community that has accepted Christ’s acceptance of us, and in this sense, it must be holy. At all times and in all situations holy members of the holy church, and therefore Christians, were and are the men assembled in it who are thereto elected by the lord, called by His Word, and constituted by His Spirit: just so many, no more and no less, these men and no others.”⁶⁴

⁶² Cone, 1969, 70.

⁶³ Cone, 1969, 70.

⁶⁴ Cone, 1969, 70–1.

CHAPTER 3

THE WHITE CHURCH AND THE THOUGHT OF JAMES H. CONE

Cone opines that the true church is an embodiment of God's people commissioned to promote the gospel of Christ throughout the world. Therefore, he continues, this true commission calls for an active participation in providing humanitarian and liberating services, which speaks of the physical manifestation of the true church of Christ and is reflective of the "new nature of society." He concludes that the white church as an institution in America has faltered in all its efforts.⁶⁵ The white church has failed in its reconciliation to provide services to those who are poor. To the contrary, the church is reflective of an oppressive society in that it demonstrates values that are oppressive towards the impoverished. Cone asserts, "Some present day theologians, like Hamilton and Altizer, taking their cue from Nietzsche and the present irrelevancy of the church to modern man, have announced the death of God."⁶⁶ Cone indicates that the white church's greatest error in relation to true Christianity "lies in their apparent identification of God's reality with the signed-up Christian."⁶⁷ To identify God's work with the white church version of Christianity then, Cone continues, is like Altizer, saying, 'We must all will the death of God with a passion of faith; or as Camus would say, if God did exist, we should have to abolish him.'⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Cone, 1969, 71.

⁶⁶ Cone, 1969, 71

⁶⁷ Cone, 1969, 71.

⁶⁸ Cone, 1969, 71.

The white church has failed in its visible manifestation as the true body of Christ and in God's plan as to how the gospel should be presented to the world. Cone stresses that the white church is more of an agent of the "old society" than a representative body that correlates with God's plan of redemption.⁶⁹ The white church has failed in its attempt to create an environment with strict adherence to obedience to our Lord and Savior. For example, the majority of white church fellowship gatherings are more concerned with socializing and planning new structures. White churches become more concerned with how they are going to close out on Sunday than how they are going to heal the plight of the poor and oppressed. Cone points these churches toward a greater good to help those "who die of rat bites or men who are killed because they want to be treated like men."⁷⁰

Because of the white church's ambivalence to the plight of the poor, Cone says that American society is in moral decay due to poor leadership, and the white church establishment "passes innocuously pious resolutions and waits to be congratulated."⁷¹ The white church supported slavery and facilitated the atrocity of white supremacy in its failure to preach the true liberating spirit of the gospel of Christ. Today, white churches as well as white institutions of learning at the collegiate level has a lingering character of racism.⁷²

Racism has been such an intricate part of white church religious culture that not even its most honorable members recognize the racist nature of the white church. Instead of denouncing racism, the white church encourages it. Cone expounds, "Its morals are so immoral that even its most sensitive minds are unable to detect the inhumanity of the Church on the black people of

⁶⁹ Cone, 1969, 71

⁷⁰ Cone, 1969, 71.

⁷¹ Cone, 1969, 71–2.

⁷² Cone, 1969, 72.

America.”⁷³ Cone reflects on the thoughts of a white southern churchman, Kyle Haselden puts forth the question, “We must ask our whether our morality is itself immoral, whether our codes of righteousness are, when applied to the Negro, a violation and distortion of the Christian ethic. Do we not judge what is right and what is wrong in racial relationships by a righteousness which is itself unrighteous, by codes and creeds which are themselves immoral?”⁷⁴ Cone offers the answer to this question should be common knowledge. The white church has erred in “the enshrining of that which is immoral as the highest morality.”⁷⁵ Cone affirms the words of Jesus in regards to this type of sin. As Jesus warns, “Truly I tell you, all sins and blasphemes will be forgiven for the sons of men. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, but is guilty of an eternal sin. He said this because they the Pharisees were saying, ‘He has an evil spirit.’”⁷⁶ Cone stresses that this type of sin is never recognized; therefore, it can never be forgiven.

Cone uses the thought of Pierre Berton in defense of the sin of the white church establishment from America’s infancy as follows:

Pierre Berton puts it mildly: In...the racial struggle, there is revealed the same pattern of tardiness, apathy, non-commitment, and outright opposition by the church....Indeed, the history of the race struggle in the United States has been to a considerably extent the history of the Protestant rapport with the status quo, From the beginning, it was church that put its blessing on slavery and sanctioned a caste system that continues to this day.⁷⁷

Cone emphasizes that many of white churchmen would rather deny or ignore this issue altogether, but this is a mistake. Racism is in incompatible with and is a repudiation of the

⁷³ Cone, 1969, 72.

⁷⁴ Cone, 1969, 72.

⁷⁵ Cone, 1969, 72.

⁷⁶ Mark 3:28–30, KJV Bible.

⁷⁷ Cone, 1969, 72.

Incarnation and Christianity. The white church establishments cannot be considered Christian because of the tolerance and perpetuation of racism.⁷⁸ Affirming his thoughts on how today's church is antithetical to the gospel, Cone states,

The old philosophical distinction between the primary and secondary qualities of objects provides the analogy here, where only the primary qualities pertain to the essence of the thing. Regarding the church, are not fellowship and service primary qualities, without which the church is not the church? Can we still speak of a community as being Christian if that body is racist through and through?⁷⁹

The presence of racism within the church is reflective of the lacking of true fellowship and Christian service that form the essence and nature of the church. To have a racist character is contrary to the true definition of what the church's mandate. Cone considers the controversy of racism within the white church establishment to be parallel to the Arian Controversy during the fourth century. The toleration of Arian views from the perspective of Athanasius would lead to the death of Christianity. The White church establishment has failed to contend with the issue of racism being tolerated within the white church as "denial of Jesus Christ."⁸⁰ Cone uses the thoughts of Kyle Haselden again in alignment with his own thoughts of the institution of the white church. Of the nature of the white church, Haselden states, "If there is any meaning of the anti or principalities and powers, the white church seems to be a manifestation of it. It is the enemy of Christ."⁸¹

Cone affirms that the white church institution spearheaded the agenda of supporting and validating slavery and establishing a cultural tradition of segregation within the church itself.

⁷⁸Cone, 1969, 72–3.

⁷⁹Cone, 1969, 72–3.

⁸⁰Cone, 1969, 73.

⁸¹Cone, 1969, 73.

Cone uses the words of Frank Loescher to validate that the white church's existence spawned the institution of white supremacy before the sanctioned doctrine of *separate but equal* would evolve with it public signs designating whites and blacks. Cone believes Haselden's thoughts on the white church is proof that the white church is responsible for racist attitudes and segregation that would become a part of the American way of life, supported by written law.⁸²

From the very beginning, Cone asserts that segregation was established in America's first churches before it spread to society. Segregation within the religious establishment was further perpetuated by the gradual withdraw of black Christians from within the white churches that facilitated racial segregation among church denominations. The all-white members of the white church establishment gave racism an element of approval, a "respectable attitude" throughout American society, as Cone saw it.⁸³ Refusing to speak out against such practices creates an acceptance of racist cultural ethos that degrades African Americans. Cone explains, "It is the church which preaches that blacks are inferior to whites, if not by word, certainly by moral example."⁸⁴ The white church, in support of the institution of slavery, preached a gospel that claimed slavery was the divine will of God and the bible was the tool that established that divine decree.⁸⁵ White Christianity faltered in bringing any real sense of dignity and purpose to the lives of the Negro slave as far as experiencing tangible liberty in life. White church Christianity dehumanized all Negroes held in bondage. The lowly state of slavery had been validated in the white church by perpetuating a doctrine that claimed the creator himself cursed people with black skin. Being a descendant of Ham with black skin was the proof and visible sign of the curse. Cone informs that "parts of the Bible were carefully selected to prove that God had

⁸²Cone, 1969, 73.

⁸³Cone, 1969, 74.

⁸⁴Cone, 1969, 74.

⁸⁵Cone, 1969, 74.

intended that negro should be the servant of the white man, and that he would always be a hewer of wood and a drawer of water.”⁸⁶

Cone blames the clergy within the white church and the ecclesiology disseminated through its literature perpetuated and accommodated racism within the white church. George D. Armstrong wrote *The Christian Doctrine of Slavery*, saying, “*Christian’s slavery* is God’s solution of the problem relation of labor and capital about which the wisest statesmen of Europe confess themselves at fault.”⁸⁷ Fred A Ross also wrote the statement in his book, *Slavery Ordained of God*, that “slavery is ordained of God . . . to continue for the good of the slave, the good of the master, the good of the whole American family, until another and better destiny may be unfolded.”⁸⁸

Today that very same white church sentiment rings a familiar tone of dehumanizing the oppressed in the face of continued violence towards men of black America for demanding to be treated equally. Cone asserts that the white church preach a gospel of adherence to all laws, and never bother to question whether or not our laws are racist in nature against certain sectors of the population or specific culture of people. This also includes laws that allow enforcers of the same law to carryout raids of violent tyranny on African-Americans living in low-income communities. The white church establishment has a negative perception of the phrase *black power* without any acknowledgement of 350 years of the tyranny of white power, and the devastating effects its violence has wreaked upon black Americans. “It was the white church which placed God’s approval on slavery and today places his blessings on the racist structure of American society,” Cone attests.⁸⁹ As long as white Americans justify their behavior, either

⁸⁶Cone, 1969, 74.

⁸⁷Cone, 1969, 74.

⁸⁸Cone, 1969, 74.

⁸⁹Cone, 1969, 75.

ecclesiastical or secular, their racist violence towards black Americans will continue to abound, and the racist structure will not likely change. Rather, Cone cautions, their racist violence will have no limit. For example, racism can usher in genocide as it did with Native Americans. Cone affirms that America and its institutionalized structure of racism will have no problem with doing likewise to African-Americans. Cone speaks of numerous writers that demonstrate their personal interest to propagate slavery in support of racist ideology in the United States.

Historically, white Christians have demonstrated their discomfort with the Christianization of the slaves. There was a fear that education through preaching the gospel would facilitate thoughts and feelings of equality and the desire for freedom within slaves. Slaveholders stood against baptizing slaves due to the actual condition that slaves were seen as property and not free equal agents to white Americans. Slaveholders considered the notion of baptism for slaves as a violation and invasion of the rights of what they considered to be their personal property. The white churchmen promoted the belief that Christianity itself had no influence upon issues involving freedom or those issues that were civil.⁹⁰

Cone affirms why the roots of racism in its origins was so prevalent within the white church and its ecclesiology until modern day. Cone uses the thoughts of the Bishop of London in the bishop's comments on Christianity and civil property, saying,

Christianity, and the embracing of the Gospel, does not make the least alteration in civil property or in any of the duties which belong to civil relations; but in all these respects, it continues persons just in the same state as it found them. The Freedom which Christianity gives, is a freedom from the bondage of sin and Satan, and from the Dominion of men's lust and passions and inordinate desires; but as to their outward condition, whatever that

⁹⁰Cone 1969, 75.

was before, whether bond or free, their being baptized and becoming Christians, makes no matter of change in it.⁹¹

Some white Christians believed that Christianizing slaves enhanced the character of black slaves. A Methodist missionary opined that Christianizing slaves was the antidote to rebellion and helped to calm slaves, giving them direction to obey laws, put into action by man, and deter slaves from sinning. Those slaves that were Methodists were never proven guilty of participation in the rebellions of insurrection against the institution of slavery between 1760 to 1833.⁹²

Within the white church establishment, many white clergymen owned slaves. There were approximately 200 Methodists in 1844 that were slaveholders. These slaveholding Methodists were also ministers that traveled throughout the country, owning approximately 1,600 slaves. Local Methodist ministers collectively owned some ten thousand black slaves. Cone affirms that the white Methodist church establishment was responsible for the support and tolerance of the institution of slavery and did not consider the incompatibility of slavery and Christianity.

Cone records that there was a split among the Methodist Christians between the North and South in 1844 because of the issue of slavery. The North was more opposing to the institution of slavery. There was not an issue whereby whites in the North saw blacks as equals in their humanity to white Christians. It was in the Northern area among white Christian churchmen whereby black Americans were subjected to dehumanizing attitudes and maltreatment within the white church establishments. This facilitated the withdrawal of blacks from those white church establishments in the North. Cone affirms that there is lacking evidence that white Christians in the northern part of America treated black any better than in the white southern church establishments. It was believed that Whites in the North were more tolerable of black people due

⁹¹ Cone, 1969, 75.

⁹² Cone, 1969, 76.

to abolitionism activism. The Northern states were not as economically dependent upon cotton to support their economy as the southern states were dependent upon it. Cone addresses the southern white Christian argument that they were more worried about blacks' wellbeing. He injects the thoughts of H. Richard Niebuhr in regards to the white church Christianity, saying, and "The worship of white and black people together was an indication that the great revival and the democratic doctrines of revolution which fostered the sense of equality had pricked the conscience of the churches on the subject of slavery."⁹³

Despite racism in the white church and in its ecclesiology, black gleaned some positive experiences by being a part of the white church in America's infancy. From Cone's insight, whites and blacks allowed to congregate together "at their best, sought to realize the brotherhood Jesus had practiced and Paul had preached."⁹⁴ With the white Baptists and Methodists denominations, the whites were more concerned with the equalization of human spirit in the eyes of God. This caused white missionaries and some of the slaveholders to welcome the benefits of combined worship and religious services. For blacks and whites, this was "the common gospel in a common church with members of the race."⁹⁵ Cone feels that because Niebuhr was a white man, his whiteness overshadowed his theological perspective. Cone asserts, "For it is clear that that integration was a practice in the southern churches because, as Niebuhr himself says, it was the less of two evils."⁹⁶ For the white church establishment in the south it was considered not to be in the best interest of the Southern aristocracy to allow black slaves in the south to have separate, independent church services. The slave insurrection led by Nat Turner affirmed this standard among white southern Christians, and soon the formation of laws to regulate slave

⁹³ Cone, 1969, 76–7.

⁹⁴ Cone, 1969, 77.

⁹⁵ Cone, 1969, 77.

⁹⁶ Cone, 1969, 77.

religious services was implemented. The integration of blacks and whites in the religious church services allowed whites to monitor the blacks more closely. Cone reflects once more on the thoughts of Kyle Haselden in his characterization of the white church establishment, Haselden saying, “it was and is the mother of racial patterns, the purveyor of arrant sedatives, and the teacher of immoral moralities.”⁹⁷

In addition, the Quakers represented a more positive white church ecclesiology. They had a stronger identification and adherence to the doctrine of Christ within white Christianity. With leaders like George Fox and George Keith, the Quakers acknowledged the incompatibility of slavery within the true gospel of Christ. Cone presents the Quaker resolution in which they speak of the sentiments of true white Christians as inspired by the gospel as follows:

Now tho’ they are black, we cannot conceive there is more liberty to have them slaves, as it is to have other white ones. There is a saying, that we shall doe to all men, like as we will be done ourselves: making no difference of what generation, descent, or color they are. And those who steal or rob men, and those who buy or purchase them, are they not all alike? Here is liberty of conscience, which is right and reasonable, here ought to be likewise liberty of the body, except of evildoers, which is another case. But to bring men hither, or to rob and sell them against their will, we stand against.⁹⁸

The words of the Quaker resolution spawned the sentiment of Cone that it would have been far more beneficial to have had more white men aligned with a Quaker-like mindset than those of other white churches. There existed the economic issue, which held more influence over the actions of men rather than the doctrine of religion. However, among the Quakers, which is a

⁹⁷ Cone, 1969, 77

⁹⁸ Cone, 1969, 78.

part of the white church, “the spirit of freedom and liberty in civil matters was at least the concern of some Quakers, which is more than can be said of others.”⁹⁹

Despite the history presented, the white church establishment has renounced the conception of Black Power or turned a deaf ear like many of the white scholars in white universities and colleges. The white church has refused to embrace the ideology of black freedom. The Loetscher’s study, comprised of 25 denominations in the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, reveals that the majority of the white church establishments were indifferent to white brutality inflicted upon black people in America. After World War I, the Methodist and Baptist denominations had ministers that were active participants in white supremacist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). It is without a doubt that the white church is a religious and racist institution and does not seem bothered by the stain. Cone puts forth his strongest argument on the white church’s racist legacy, proclaiming,

So far as the major denominations are concerned, it is the story of indifference, vacillation, and duplicity It is a History in which the church not only compromised its ethic to the mood and practice of the times but was itself actively unethical, sanctioning the enslavement of human beings, producing the patterns of segregation, urging upon the oppressed Negro the extracted sedatives of the Gospel, and promulgating a doctrine of interracial morality which is itself immoral.¹⁰⁰

When it came to immorality of the white church and what it sanctioned through its silence, Cone asserts that during one the most violent eras of inhumane treatment against Black Americans, the white church barely responded to the many lynching events carried out against blacks in America.

⁹⁹ Cone, 1969, 78.

¹⁰⁰ Cone, 1969, 78.

Cone likens the true meaning between the tree of the cross with the lynching tree despite a gulf of some two thousand years between the events. The cross itself is representative of the faith that all Christians have in the risen Christ, while the tree of lynching is representative of the oppression and shame that is inflicted upon blacks in America. The cross resonates the hope and salvation for humanity while the lynching tree screams brutality at the hand of white supremacy. As Cone asserts, with the exception of artists of literature, few people admit the parallels between Jesus' death on the tree of crucifixion and the lynching deaths of many black American men and women.¹⁰¹

Cone describes how white church salvation for the last two thousand years has excluded any concept of oppression or endurance of the suffering—those whom Ignacio Ellacuria, the Salvadoran martyr, called “the crucified people of history.”¹⁰² Rather, the cross into an ornament of harmlessness that has become more of a fashion statement than reverent symbol of oppression. In this manner, the cross has lost its true meaning of the price of discipleship. The Cross “has become a form of cheap grace, an easy way to salvation that does not force us to confront the power of Christ’s message and mission.”¹⁰³ Cone stresses that the cross and the lynching tree must be seen as one of the same and not separate. He describes Christ with a “crucified black body hanging from a lynching tree” and true comprehension of what it means to be a Christian in the United States of America will be obstructed. The deliverance from the horrors of slavery and the ignorance of white supremacy will be delayed.

Furthermore, Cone reveals that highly regarded white writers and people from within the highest office itself, the White House, has supported the white church in its ecclesiology and accommodation of racism. During the reconstruction era after the Civil War, books like Thomas

¹⁰¹ Cone, 2011, xiii.

¹⁰² Cone, 2011, xiv.

¹⁰³ Cone, 2011, xv.

Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots* (1902) and D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, explore the South's ideology on reconstruction. These books portray white supremacist groups like the Klan as "redeemers of the South."¹⁰⁴ *The Birth of a Nation* was reviewed at the White House. President Woodrow Wilson while he was living in the White House also reviewed the movie, *The Birth of a Nation*, which was well received by Southerners as a kind of religious event. The approval of the movie of *The Birth of A nation* resonated so well with Southern whites that it facilitated the killing of a black male by a white man after the white male left the movie theater.¹⁰⁵ Regarding the movie, Cone summarized, "It rendered lynching an efficient and honorable act of justice and served to help reunite the North and South as a white Christian nation, at the expense of Africans Americans."¹⁰⁶

Despite the remarkable parallels between the cross and the lynching tree, the lynching of blacks in America has not been included with any imagery in relation to the Death of Christ at Golgotha. Cone states, "The conspicuous absence of the lynching tree in American theological discourse and preaching is profoundly revealing, especially since the crucifixion was clearly a first century lynching."¹⁰⁷ Throughout the year of lynching of blacks, white Christians of the white church actively participated in lynching of some five thousand blacks—both men and women. Cone emphasizes the lynchings were conducted "in a manner with obvious ethos of the Roman crucifixion of Jesus."¹⁰⁸ Cone proclaims the white Christians who participated in the lynchings could not recognize the truth of their actions in regards to being professed white Christian and the quality of their own persons. Cone concludes that the failure of white church

¹⁰⁴ Cone, 2011, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Cone, 2011, 5.

¹⁰⁶ Cone, 2011, 5.

¹⁰⁷ Cone, 2011, 43.

¹⁰⁸ Cone, 2011, 43.

Christians to recognize the correlation between the cross and the lynching tree does not surprise him due to the fact they themselves were the principle agents of white supremacy.¹⁰⁹

In the final analysis on the ecclesiology of the white church, Cone affirms that the theology of the white church has been formulated out of and interpreted within the white cultural, social, and political interests. This white theology originated by the theological thoughts of white men like Johnathan Edwards, Schubert Ogden, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Cotton Mather, of whom Cone suggests, “have rarely attempted to transcend the social interests of their group by seeking an analysis of the gospel in light of the consciousness of black people struggling for liberation.”¹¹⁰ Furthermore, Cone believes that, for the most part, white theologians identify more with their historical roots of ancestry.¹¹¹

During the period of the enslavement of blacks in the Americas, many white theologians overlooked the controversy of slavery in their theological discourse, while others used a theological discourse to validate the enslaving of black humanity. Only a small minority of white theologians spoke in opposition to the enslaving of blacks. Among many of the white denominations in American history, including Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Baptists, and Methodists, it was common for them to disregard the issue of slavery in relation to their theology. Many of these churches refused to admit slavery was a practicing institution in America. Such great men like Jonathan Edwards, respected as one of one of American’s greatest theologians “could preach and write theological treatises on total depravity, unconstitutional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints without the slightest hint of how these issues related to human bondage.”¹¹² Cone asserts that Edwards and

¹⁰⁹ Cone, 2011, 43.

¹¹⁰ Cone, 1997, 43.

¹¹¹ Cone, 1997, 43.

¹¹² Cone, 1997, 43–4.

other like-minded theologians interpreted the gospel as he himself had interpreted it, influenced from the theological perspectives of Calvinism and the intellectual influence from the age of enlightenment. Edwards was an advocate and fighter for the faith of the reformed, yet the controversy of the institution of slavery in America would not appear in his theological discourse or in the theological discourse of many of his white contemporaries.

CHAPTER 4

THE BLACK CHURCH AND THE THOUGHT OF JAMES H. CONE

The black church was born out the inhumanity and brutality of white power. From its inception, the black church under the institution of slavery affirmed the humanity, solidified the identity, and created the community of black culture. Black American slaves shared a culture of serfdom in the absence of social, economic, and political power as the intent of slavery was the “annihilation of persons.”¹¹³ Often the lowly existence of some slaves drove them to desperate acts of suicide and fatal acts of rebellion. Even more, they rejected the white man’s attempt at degrading black humanity, and the black church became the source for blacks religiously and spiritually to stage a revolution.¹¹⁴

Many slaves used the church as a tool of cultural survival in either taking up arms or transporting slaves to areas less volatile than their base plantations. The independent black churches residing in the northern areas of the United States facilitated Underground Railroad operations. The mission of slaves became a risky yet worthwhile journey to the North for a new life in America or further north to Canada. To this end, the black church under the institution of slavery became the cultural center for the proclamation of freedom and hope of equality.¹¹⁵

In Cone’s analysis of black church men during the Antebellum period, he explains, “The black churchmen did not accept white interpretations of Christianity, which suggested the gospel was concerned with freedom of the soul and not the body.” Cone describes black church services

¹¹³ Cone, 1969, 92.

¹¹⁴ Cone, 1969, 92.

¹¹⁵ Cone, 1969, 93.

where the spiritual character would find hope and faith among the enslaved people while the black ministers preached of a better day coming and land “flowing with milk and honey.” This reality should be assessed in reference to the inhumane existence and brutality that black slaves in America experienced every day of their lives as the result of white power.¹¹⁶

Because of the severe hardships inflicted on American slaves, little hope found its way into their lives. Black spirituals like “I’s So Glad Trouble Do not Last Always” and “I know de udder Worl’ Is Not Like Dis” provided an outlet for their suffering and an inlet for hope to flow. In this manner, slaves did not allow their personal hardship to render God “irrelevant,” despite, as Cone suggests, “as slaves looked at life, he [God] appeared not to care.”¹¹⁷ For slaves to keep hope alive in the midst of their sorrow meant they had to look to another reality, that is, the divine.¹¹⁸ Cone emphasizes that within the black church, slaves dismissed the perversion of white Christianity that was orchestrated to convince them that chattel slavery was the natural order of things as ordained by God himself. The slaves’ pie-in-the-sky religion of the black slave church kept slaves looking forward to a new day. One of Cone’s most affirming thoughts of the formation of the black church out of the institution of slavery, reveals, “White power may have persuaded some to be passive and accept the present reality of serfdom; but generally when slaves sang of heaven, it was because they realize the futility of rebellion and not because they accepted slavery.”¹¹⁹

Cone feels the indomitable spirit and character of the black church under the institution of slavery was expressed vehemently through the Negro spiritual that “some are protesting and rebellious in character. Comparing their own enslavement with Israelite bondage in Egypt, they

¹¹⁶ Cone, 1969, 93

¹¹⁷ Cone, 1969, 93.

¹¹⁸ Cone, 1969, 93.

¹¹⁹ Cone, 1969, 93.

sang, “Go Down, Moses.”¹²⁰ Cone expressed that it was an approach that was subtle in its application in the want of the end of human bondage through the spirituals. Cone gives an example “when Israel was in Egypt’s land, Let my people go: Oppressed so hard they could not stand, Let my people go: Go down, Moses, ‘way down in Egypt’s; and; Tell old pharaoh-Let my people go.”¹²¹

The formation of the black church out of slavery and black men learning to preach and teach were strong affirmations of slaves identifying Christianity and freedom as being one in the same. The black church served as a base and cultural necessity of protest against human bondage. In fact, Cone asserts that the formation of the black church within the institution of slavery was the forerunner of black power, explaining, “Unlike the white church, its reality stemmed from the eschatological recognition that freedom and equality are at the essence of humanity, and thus segregation and slavery are diametrically opposed to Christianity.”¹²²

Cone confirms that the central focus of the black church from its infancy was its concern with the achievement of freedom through protest and the bringing about of equality through definitive action by all black people. The white missionaries with the white church establishment focused more on a religious element of the promise of a better world in the next life; however, the black slave religion saw the necessity to improve their plight through the spirit of religion in the present world. Cone attests that it was blacks’ lack of and desire for freedom and human equality that drew them toward connection in Christianity. Although the oppressors were teaching Christianity to them, “Slaves believed the white Masters’ religion was the best way to freedom.”¹²³

¹²⁰ Cone, 1969, 93.

¹²¹ Cone, 1969, 93.

¹²² Cone, 1969, 94.

¹²³ Cone, 1969, 94.

Cone affirms the independent black church of today exists because of the renunciation of the white man's version of Christianity. Cone relies on a pivotal turning point in the master-slave relationship in the church to convey the why and true starting point of the independent black church of today. In 1787, Richard Allen and his followers departed St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia because they refused to bow down to the alleged natural order of the white man's rule, which was central to white supremacy and black inferiority status quo. Referring to this event as a pivotal moment in black church history, Cone cites Richard Allen's reflection on what would eventually mark the formation of the African Methodists Episcopal Church,¹²⁴ as follows:

We had not been long upon our knees before I heard considerable scuffling and low talking. I raised my head up and saw one of the trustees, H. M., having hold of the Reverend Absalom Jones, pulling him up off his knees, and saying, "You must get up. You must not kneel here." Mr. Jones replied, "Wait until prayer is over." Mr. H. M. said, "No, you must get up now, or I will call for aid and force you away." Mr. Jones said, "Wait until prayer is over, and I will trouble you no more." With that he beckoned to one of the other trustees, Mr. L. S., to come to his assistance. He came, and went to William White to pull him up. By this time prayer was over, and we all went out of the church in a body, and they were no more plagued with us in the Church. . . . My dear Lord was with us, and we were filled with fresh vigor to get a house erected to worship God in.¹²⁵

Cone verifies the hypocritical attitudes embraced by white northern Christians about themselves and towards black people. Northern white Christians presumptuously assumed that their treatment and reception of black people in America was somehow always far better than

¹²⁴ Cone, 1969, 95.

¹²⁵ Cone, 1969, 95.

how southern white Christians treated and received blacks in the church. The northern white Christians viewed themselves as a people that welcomed black people in the house of God. However, Cone argues, “The White northern church doors may have been opened, but only if blacks accepted their assigned places by whites.”¹²⁶ It would have been more appropriate according to Cone for Northerners to come to the realization that the emergence and prosperity of the independent black church was facilitated by refusal of black people to continue to endure the dehumanizing institutionalized racism, an intricate part of the very character and nature of the white church establishment. Cone affirms that similar to their counterparts in the south, white northern Christians did not equate the humanity of blacks mind, body, and soul with the mind, body, and soul of whites. Therefore, northern whites conducted their church affairs not differently in sentiment or practice as southern whites, regarding themselves as superior to black members of their congregations.

Cone returns to the Richard Allen incident as exemplary of the actions black people took in the northern region of America to liberate themselves from the racist dominance of white supremacy prevalent in the white church throughout the country. As a result, black people found freedom to praise God in truth and spirit from under the umbrella of the claims of white superiority. The independent black church became the center for unlimited spiritual and cultural growth of personhood and leadership. The suppressed emotions of the Christian slave had found a place for true release.¹²⁷

Early in the history of the black independent church, black ministers of the caliber of Rev. Highland Garnet encouraged absolute defiance in resistance to the structural system of racism and white power. Cone affirms that the methodology of “good will” would prove to be

¹²⁶ Cone, 1969, 95.

¹²⁷ Cone, 1969, 95–6.

ineffective against the twisted minds of white supremacist due to their “own high estimation of themselves.”¹²⁸ He cites wisdom in how Garnet preached God’s intent in the black church, Garnet proclaiming, “The spirit of liberty is a gift from God, and God thus endows the slave with the zeal to break the chains of slavery.”¹²⁹

Cone also uses the thoughts and words of Rev. Highland Garner to explain the determined black spiritual mindset, nature, and intent toward combatting racial oppression in the spiritual battle of liberation. This is the message Garner had forwarded to slaves in 1848 in Baffle, New York:

If . . . a band of Christians should attempt to enslave a race of heathen men, and to entail slavery upon them and to keep them in heathenism in the midst of Christianity, the God of heaven would smile upon every effort, which the injured might make to disenthral themselves. Brethren, it is wrong for your lordly oppressors to keep you in slavery as it was for the man-thief to steal our ancestors from the coast of Africa. You should therefore now use the same manner of resistance as would have been just in our ancestors when the bloody footprints of the first remorseless soul-thief were placed upon the shores of our fatherland. The humblest peasant is as free in the sight of God as the proudest monarch that ever swayed a scepter. Liberty is a spirit sent from God and, like its great Author, is no respecter of persons. Brethren, the time has come when you must act for yourselves. It is an old and true saying that, “If hereditary bondmen would be free, they must themselves strike a blow.”¹³⁰

Cone affirms that the majority of black ministers during the institution of slavery in America did not become actively involved with slave revolts of any kind; however, Cone

¹²⁸ Cone, 1969, 96.

¹²⁹ Cone, 1969, 96.

¹³⁰ Cone, 1969, 96.

explains there were those black ministers more inclined to believe that God would one day intervene rather than allow slavery to continue forever. Cone cites Rev. Nathaniel Paul who explains, “Did I believe that it [slavery] would always continue . . . I would at once confess myself an atheist, and deny the existence of a holy God. God must be against slavery, and not merely passively against it, but actively fighting destroy it.”¹³¹ God is anti-slavery and is engaged in functional capacity in his action with humankind to annihilate slavery. In fact, Cone argues that it is impossible to believe truly in the existence of God while simultaneously believing chattel slavery is an acceptable human condition in God’s will.¹³² “Most black preachers in this time period were thus in a state of existential absurdity, Cone declares.”¹³³ They were confounded as to why such a twisting of truth and wrongful theology had been conceived and why had God allowed this bondage to continue. “Like the biblical Job,” Cone indicates, “they [black preachers] knew that whatever their sins or the sins of their forefathers, they did not justify slavery.”¹³⁴ In the minds of the slaves, their punishment was not justifiable, and the people that were oppressing them were hardly honorable enough to be considered saints. Cone asserts that from slaves’ perspectives, regarding the tone of spiritual or religious matter of the black slave church, God’s righteousness was being questioned in regards to the slave’s bondage. Once again, Cone returns to the words of Rev. Nathaniel Paul to demonstrate slaves’ mental sentiment that questioned God about permissive slavery, Paul saying,

Tell me, ye mighty waters, why did ye sustain the ponderous load of misery, Or speak, ye winds, and say why it was that ye executed your office to waft them onward to the still more dismal state; and ye proud waves, why did you refuse to lend your aid and to have

¹³¹ Cone, 1969, 97.

¹³² Cone, 1969, 97.

¹³³ Cone, 1969, 97.

¹³⁴ Cone, 1969, 97.

overwhelmed them with billow? Then should they have slept sweetly in the bosom of the great deep, and so have been hid from sorrow. And, oh thou immaculate God, be not angry with us, while we come into thy sanctuary, and make the bold inquiry in this thy holy temple, why it was that thou didst look on with claim indifference of an unconcerned spectator, when thy holy law was violated, thy divine authority despised and a portion of thine own creatures reduced to a state of mere vassalage and misery?¹³⁵

Here, Cone parallels Paul's words to those of Biblical figures Job and Habakkuk, both of whom in their own way question God's righteousness and His allowance of such suffering.

Chattel slavery is incompatible with God's nature and character. To relate the love of a righteous God with the brutality of slavery and white power bullwhips is nonsensical. Cone affirms that the black people await a response from God if God wants black humanity as a servant.¹³⁶

Cone suggests Rev. Nathaniel Paul's view of Christianity is "closely tied to the present reality of this world."¹³⁷ Indeed, Cone expounds that there is no indication the gospel is not related to the ongoing human existence in life. God in the essence and conception of being God cannot will chattel slavery to be. To think any differently on this matter, in Cone's view, is a distortion or denial of reality. Cone poses the question, "How can we affirm his existence and believe that he permits slavery?" This contradiction, Cone explains, caused many black preachers within the black church to be in turmoil. Cone explains for slaves and black ministers to believe in God was not an easy undertaking but rather a challenging one because of the tremendous responsibility being a minister carries, carrying burdens of his people having to deal with such hardships while trying to offer adequate explanations of such horrible sufferings.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Cone, 1969, 97.

¹³⁶ Cone, 1969, 97–8.

¹³⁷ Cone, 1969, 98.

¹³⁸ Cone, 1969, 98.

The post-Civil War black church with a vibrant spirit of independence became the pinnacle of black expression of freedom. In this era, the black church became the one place where blacks could withdraw from the humiliating experience and influences of white supremacy. It was from within the black church after the civil war where blacks were selected to function in public offices once off-limits to black people. The emancipated black independent church became a refuge from the new rigid form of Jim Crow that replaced slavery and a platform for escape rather than protest. Cone regards Jim Crow in its horrific effects in relation to the institution of slavery, saying, “In slavery, one knows what the odds are and what is needed to destroy the power of the enemy. But in a society which pronounces a man free but makes him behave as a slave, all of the strength and will power is sapped from the would-be rebel. The structures of evil are camouflage, the enemy is elusive, and the victim is trained to accept the values of the oppressors.”¹³⁹ The oppressed is informed their lowly state is the result of the natural process of their own intellectual inferiority.

The oppressed becomes convinced that they need to transform and become more in the image of their oppressor, which will eliminate the oppressors ridicule. To this end, “self-help programs” were initiated for the education and training for the oppressed ignorant. This became a major undertaking for black churches in the era led by blacks that were in the image of Booker T. Washington in their stature, knowledge, and religion.¹⁴⁰

Cone feels that with the onset of a completely new white power structure as equally as oppressive as slavery, the black church fight and zeal for freedom diminished. The institution of segregation and oppressive forms of discrimination caused the black church to become soft in its quest for equality for black people in the post-Civil War era. Cone expounds on the post-Civil

¹³⁹ Cone, 1969, 104–5.

¹⁴⁰ Cone, 1969, 104–5.

War black minister, saying, “The black minister remained the spokesman for black people, but faced by insurmountable obstacles, he succumbed to the cajolery and bribery of the white power structure and became its foil.”¹⁴¹

Cone conveys that the black church passions of the post-civil war era took on a religious discourse in the renunciation of the consumption of alcohol, secular dancing and the prohibition against smoking. The black church no longer made the current injustices in society its central focus. Rather, it emphasized a heavenly war waiting for the transcendent kingdom beyond this world. The post-Civil War black churches conformed to the standards of theology that had been taught by white missionaries. Black Christians were encouraged to hope in and activate their faith for a better tomorrow, but to concern themselves with hoping for much in the present day, black ministers encouraged blacks to assimilate the standards and moral codes of the white ethos and to adhere to laws as out forth by the ruling establishment which were all whites.¹⁴²

Furthermore, black ministers preached a philosophy that deterred blacks from being concerned with the unfairness and righteousness of this world. For one to be more concerned with getting justice, it meant that there was a diminished in the exercise of true faith and lack of awareness that longsuffering and the exercise of Christian patience were more essential in the kingdom of god and his final judgement. They were not to look for current justice in the world, but to endure to the end and achieve that great liberation in the kingdom to come.¹⁴³In Cone’s most descriptive thoughts, he says, “The black minister thus became a most devoted ‘Uncle Tom,’ the transmitter of white wishes, the admonisher of obedience to the caste system.”¹⁴⁴Cone also describes the black minister as the middleman between the oppressed black America and the

¹⁴¹ Cone, 1969, 105.

¹⁴² Cone, 1969, 105.

¹⁴³ Cone, 1969, 105.

¹⁴⁴ Cone, 1969, 105–6.

ruling faction of white supremacy. The black minister gave white Americans those comforting words of assurance of peace and contentment that white Americans desired from black Americans, thereby quenching the spirit of liberation among his own people greater than any other entity.¹⁴⁵

Cone reflects on the thoughts and criticism of the new post-Civil War black church of Clair Drake and Horace. Clayton saying,

Blood suckers . . . they'll take the food out of your mouth and make you think they are doing you a favor. You take these preachers . . . they're living like kings—got great big Packard automobiles and ten or twelve suits and a bunch of sisters putting food in their pantry. Do you call that religion? Naw? It ain't nothing but a bunch of damn monkey foolishness Church members were almost as critical, as shown by three separate comments. I'm a church member. I believe churches are still useful. But like everything else, there is a lot of racketeering going on in the church. Ministers are not as conscientious as they used to be. They are money-mad nowadays. All they want is the almighty dollar and that is all they talk.¹⁴⁶

Cone considered the actions of some of the churches and their leaders more in line with apostasy for their accommodation of the iron cast system of Jim Crow and segregation, which was facilitated by the actions of white supremacy in fear of being lynched or having their churches set a fire. These churches believed that, through cooperation with the white establishment, they could establish an element of peace and protection for the black

¹⁴⁵ Cone, 1969, 106.

¹⁴⁶ Cone, 1969, 106–7.

communities. Cone accepts no legitimate excuse for the disregard for the theology of Christ; it only provides an inexcusable explanation for it.¹⁴⁷

The most gravest of errors of the black church, Cone indicates, was that “they convinced themselves that they were doing the right thing by advocating obedience to white oppression as a means of entering at death the future age of heavenly bliss. The black church identified white words with God’s word and convinced it people that by listening in faithful obedience to the great white Father.”¹⁴⁸ This affirms that the original traditional black church in existence in the pre-Civil War era is absent after the war ended.¹⁴⁹

Furthermore, Cone accuses the post-Civil War black minister of erroring even more by accepting personal favors from within the white establishment. For the most part, the black churches were left to run their own establishment as they saw fit while continuing to preach obedience to the oppressors’ laws and remaining faithful in hope for the promised rewards of tomorrow’s heaven. Funding for black denominations to build new facilities came from successful white businesses within the white establishment that saw the opportunities as sound business investments. Black ministers helped to facilitate and maintain the system as it was, and blacks in return showed their appreciation for the financial support that came from white businesses.¹⁵⁰

In the northern area of America, the black church establishments like in the South were not totally free of white influence and control “like southern black ministers, they too emphasized white moralities as a means of entrance in God’s future Kingdom.”¹⁵¹ There were very few black church establishments in the north willing to actively and openly challenge the

¹⁴⁷ Cone, 1969, 107.

¹⁴⁸ Cone, 1969, 107.

¹⁴⁹ Cone, 1969, 107.

¹⁵⁰ Cone, 1969, 107–8.

¹⁵¹ Cone, 1969, 108.

white establishment alongside of those who were oppressed. The black churches in the north focused on worldlier issues such as the increase of church funding for their own use. Cone's thought emphasizes "the black churches in the post-Civil War period have been no more Christian than their white counterparts."¹⁵²

During the era of nonviolent protests led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the black church establishment and its ministers returned to its original spirit of freedom and push for greater equality in the face of white oppression. Cone affirms that Dr. King reconnected with the true gospel of Christ in the fight to unite black and white Americans in the spirit of Christ. Cone attributes Dr. King as "a man endowed with the charisma of God; he was a prophet in our own time. And like no other black or white American he could set black people's hearts on fire with the gospel of freedom in Christ which would make them willing to give all for the cause of black humanity."¹⁵³ Furthermore, Cone affirms that Dr. King was able to discern the true social implication of the gospel of Christ and tried to convey the true spirit and nature of Christ to all of humanity.¹⁵⁴

Cone explicates that Dr. King was cut from the mold of the prophets of the Old Testament with dreams that were firmly grounded in the kingdom of God rather than in the kingdom of white America. Cone emphasizes that Dr. King did not allow the task of fulfilling his dream to abandon the responsibilities that demanded attention in the present. Cone's thoughts on Dr. King's dream is expressed beautifully with these words: "It may appear that white America made his dream into a nightmare by setting the climate for his assassination and later memorializing his name with meaningless pieties. But his dream was grounded in God, not in

¹⁵² Cone, 1969. 108.

¹⁵³ Cone, 1969, 108.

¹⁵⁴ Cone, 1969, 108.

man.”¹⁵⁵ Cone celebrates Dr. King for demonstrating to all people how the righteousness of God will prevail. While the concepts of black power were not fully embraced at the time, Cone asserts that due to Dr. King’s ministry and civil rights work, the true meeting of black and white America was initiated, and Black power was birthed because of Dr. King’s work.

Cone believes that advocates of Black Power can make Dr. King’s dream a reality. He explains that in order for the black church to align itself with the standards of the New Testament church in the theology of Christ, the black church must disassociate itself with all social, political, and economic ethos of the white power structure of America. Cone sees the embodiment of black power as the only alternative for the black church.¹⁵⁶

About two hundred-fifty black ministers within the black church establishment endorsed the concept and ideology of Black Power. In February 1968, Methodist ministers gathered in Cincinnati to reassess their role and ideology within the Methodist organization. They identified a need for them to affirm their own role in the new black revolution from an African American historical and cultural context. They acknowledged their own denial of blackness in their relation to the peaceful coexistence and accommodation of the white establishment and its continued issues of persistent racism—that is, “false integration” in the face of all power being retained by the white establishment.¹⁵⁷

The Methodist ministers believed that in their embracing of Black Power, it was the most logical and necessary actions in confronting racism throughout America as well as within the Methodists organization itself. They responded, “It [Black Power] is a call for us to respond to God’s action in history which is to make and keep human life human.”¹⁵⁸ To this end, the Black

¹⁵⁵ Cone, 1969, 108–9.

¹⁵⁶ Cone, 1969, 108–9.

¹⁵⁷ Cone, 1969, 110.

¹⁵⁸ Cone, 1969, 110.

Methodist clergy created guidelines to initiate negotiations between black and white churches on how to respond appropriately and accordingly to the “Black Power Revolution.”¹⁵⁹

Another major turning point within the black Church organization in America occurred in 1966 when leaders from various religious denominations put forth a statement on Black Power. Cone explains they did not fully understand black power as an ideology as far as it was being implemented in the Black Methodist churches, which embraced Black Power in relation to “Methodist church Renewal.”¹⁶⁰ However, the church leaders emphasized, “White racism is the basic reason for black unrest in America. And they also recognize that powerlessness breeds a race of beggars.”¹⁶¹

Cone stresses that black church leaders must needs guard against the dangers of spoken words and written intent. Simply because something has been intelligently articulated does not mean the intended aggressor or oppressor will relent. Rather, it is the actual recognition of the existence of problems that represents the initial step towards resolving the problems. Cone affirms the black church establishment must move forward with defiant assault against the structural evil of racism in America. Black church leaders must recognize that one successful battle does not win a war when it comes to social injustice. Victory can be achieved only when humanity unifies and functions without regard to one’s physicality. Cone summarizes, “When that happens one can be certain that God’s Kingdom has come.”¹⁶²

In Cone’s final analysis of the black church, he presents a clear picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the American black church establishment, of its past relationships, and its relation to the white church establishment. Regarding black theology, Cone identifies one of the

¹⁵⁹ Cone, 1969, 110.

¹⁶⁰ Cone, 1969, 110.

¹⁶¹ Cone, 1969, 111.

¹⁶² Cone, 1969, 111.

major strengths of the black church historically has been an element of mutual understanding and interdependence in the fight for liberation. There was the call for the black church to reconnect with its original heritage of the nineteenth century in the reidentification with African heritage, which was seen as essential in the battle against racism and reestablishing the identity of blackness in America.¹⁶³

In the assessment and effectiveness of any church establishment, Cone asserts there must be “prophetic self-criticism” of the church by its own leaders.¹⁶⁴ In the absence of such criticism and evaluations of the church mission, the church institution becomes a selfish body, absorbed with its leaders’ own personal interests. Cone affirms, “Theology, without the Christian community as the place of its origin and its continued existence, becomes sterile academic discourse uninterested in the quality of human life in society.”¹⁶⁵ Cone stresses that the black clergy avoided making either of these errors by implementing a theology for the black church that included negative and positive assessments, in order to facilitate a more effective plan of liberation. In addition, Cone asserts that the black church had to evaluate its own structural and theological weaknesses with constructive criticism; otherwise, its criticism of the white establishment and the white church in regards to the evil of racism as well as white supremacy would have become ineffective.¹⁶⁶

The major flaw in the connection between Black Theology and the Black Power element within the black church was the issue of black theology being structured and tailored for white religious institutions as well as white churches in the latter half of the sixties and early seventies. The National Conference of Black Churches leadership structure directed its message at those

¹⁶³ Cone, 1984, 111.

¹⁶⁴ Cone, 1984, 112.

¹⁶⁵ Cone, 1984, 112.

¹⁶⁶ Cone, 1984, 112.

black clergy that were part of white church establishments and white Christians. In addition, the black academics at leading white universities were more concerned with carrying out the same agenda. Black theology, Cone believed, could not maintain its substance and origin format if it was taught or preached only to white American Christians.

With the onset of the seventies, the concept of black theology, as Cone opines, had become far too academic. Black theology had to contend continuously with white theological analysis of the gospel. Cone felt this served as an obstruction to the mission of liberating black humanity in the seventies. It would have been more beneficial for black theologians to direct the concept and message of black theology toward church establishments that would have been more receptive. Cone was not completely sold on the concept of church renewal within the black denominational churches. He was more certain that the black denominational churches' leadership as well as its members could rise above the "the limitation of their denominational identity by becoming identified with Christ through the commitment to the poor."¹⁶⁷

They are active in denominations of all types and consisting of whites as well as black people. They are oriented in their determination to create a church that embodies the spirit of Christ. They are committed to providing food for those that are hungry. They conduct formal workshops and lectures on economics, politics and historical and theological principles. They are engaged in the tasks of building learning institutions that serve as alternative educational facilities for African Americans and creating various other community activities that promote the spirit of freedom. Cone affirms that these black church leaders are not only concerned with internal church politics and passivity in regards to social and cultural problems, but also "they are concrete examples that the black church is not an opiate of the victims of the land."¹⁶⁸Cone

¹⁶⁷ Cone, 1984, 114.

¹⁶⁸ Cone, 1984, 114.

declares that, from the very beginning, it has always been the duty of the black theologians to have labored more in the midst of the oppressed.¹⁶⁹

In the latter half of the seventies, the black church establishment began to return to the issue of black theology. The black leaders within the black churches organizations disliked any form of criticism from black theologians, of whom the majority had surrendered their intellectual fervor, mind, body, and soul to the white seminary establishment. These black theologians, Cone attests, avoided the risk of the much needed prophetic criticism in the sixties of the black church establishment in order to gain the black churches' acceptance. Cone insists,

The NCBC statement 'Black Theology in 1976' and the message to the black church and community of the Atlanta conference (1977) omitted a serious critique of black churches. Few, if any, noticed that Cecil Cone's *Identity Crisis in Black Theology* failed to point to a similar crisis of identity in black churches due to their theological and sometimes spiritual dependence upon white evangelical and Fundamentalist churches.¹⁷⁰

Furthermore, Cone postulates, "If there were issues of 'identity problems' due to black theologians having given the better part of themselves in their theological discourse to white seminary establishment, then the same was true for many black ministers and black churches that came under the influence of the white religious teachings of Billy Graham and other extremely "racist Christianity" of the moral majority."¹⁷¹

According to Cone, some prominent black clergy, such as Dr. Joseph H. Jackson of the National Baptist Convention, Dr. E.V. Hill, a Los Angeles minister, and Rev. J. O. Patterson, Pastor of the Church of God in Christ, had controversial affiliations with the "moral majority." These affiliations often gave the impression that they embraced and supported this ideology. Cone

¹⁶⁹ Cone, 1984, 114.

¹⁷⁰ Cone, 1984, 114–5.

¹⁷¹ Cone, 1984, 115.

points out that, if this was the case, it was due more to the fact that these black leaders allowed themselves to drift away and lose sight of the religion originating from their own black African culture. Cone uses the thoughts of Gayraud Wilmore to clarify the confusion surrounding black theologians in their mission to function within a society built on institutionalized racism even within the church establishment.¹⁷² Wilmore comments,

It is not because black theology is obscure of the doctrine of the church, but because the majority of black preachers confuse themselves with Billy Graham and the most unenlightened versions of white evangelicalism. Because they do not know the rock from which they were hewn, they and their people do not know who they are, and the inheritance that was passed on to them by men like Benjamin Tucker Tanner and William W. Colley, cannot admit the sanctification of secular conflict and struggle. Because they are willing to accept . . . ‘Americanity’ as Normative Christianity, they are unable to see how their own ethnic experience in the United States authenticates the truth of God’s revelation in scripture and how the gospel then illuminates and gives meaning to the most profound symbol of that experience, the symbol of blackness.”¹⁷³

Cone emphasizes there are few black theologians willing to be as critical and as forthright of the black church establishment as Wilmore. Those theologians silent on criticism were under the assumption that restraining the voice of “prophetic self-criticism” would render them *safe* and aligned with making things right or better. However, Cone vehemently dismisses this strategy as an even greater error.¹⁷⁴ Further, Cone explains, “There can be no genuine Christian community that to which the words of judgment and grace are given.”¹⁷⁵ Cone asserts that within

¹⁷² Cone, 1984, 115.

¹⁷³ Cone, 1984, 115–6.

¹⁷⁴ Cone, 1984, 116.

¹⁷⁵ Cone, 1984, 116.

a community in which the words of God are proclaimed and where his grace is prevalent, a prophet will reside within that community as well. Unfortunately, black theology did return to the black church establishment under that prevalent grace. Cone attributes this to compromise in relation to being open to the judgment of God, a result of having made our churches and theology into self-serving instruments of our professional advancement.¹⁷⁶

As Cone affirms, the black church can continue to build from the past to develop black theology as well as the church. The black church needs to remember those mistakes made in the past and move forward with active involvement in what Cone sees as the “future Kingdom of freedom.” Cone sees on the horizon the liberation of the poor and oppressed.¹⁷⁷

In the final analysis of James H. Cone’s thoughts on the black church, there is a clarion call for duty and responsibility of the black church to embark on an inclusive theology—one that recognizes and supports the feminine voice of the gospel of liberation. Cone calls for feminine voice in leadership roles and issues a mandate for a new political and theological solidarity to connect with the oppressed brothers and sisters in third world nations. Cone resonates the thoughts of four womanist voices on the issues of sexism and oppression of black women in the black church, which supports his thoughts on the black famine voice rights to stand equally in words, thoughts, and functionality within the black church ministry. Cone allows Sojourner Truth to speak from the grave on the historical and oppressive existence as a black woman, Truth proclaiming, “We have our rights. See if we do not. And you cannot stop us from them.”¹⁷⁸ Cone also ascribes to the thoughts of Reverend Jarena Lee from ages past on the mission of Christ to support Cone’s thoughts for equality of voice among the sexes in the Kingdom of God. Lee rallies,

¹⁷⁶ Cone, 1984, 116.

¹⁷⁷ Cone, 1984, 116.

¹⁷⁸ Cone, 1984, 122.

“O how careful ought we to be, lest through our bylaws of church government and disciple we bring into disrepute even the word of life. For as unseemly as it may appear nowadays for ac woman to preach, it should be remembered that nothing is impossible with God. And why should it be thought impossible, heterodox, or improper for a woman to preaching, seeing the savior died for the woman as well as the man?”¹⁷⁹

The words of Theresa Hoover parallels Cone’s thoughts of why black women traditionally have been reduced to the lesser vessel and silent partner in black church ministry. Hoover explains, “To be a woman, black, and active in religious institutions in the American scene is to labor under triple jeopardy.”¹⁸⁰ Cone allows the thoughts of Jacqueline Grant to affirm his thoughts of an inadequate theology of liberation within the black church that silences the black womanist theology. Grant proclaims, “If theology, like the church, has no word for Black women, its conception of liberation is inauthentic.”¹⁸¹ Cone extends that the black church organization has a duty to concern itself the treatment of women, in creating opportunities for women to grow spiritually in their Christian walk with God, and in providing services that they are willing and able to render.

The issue of total liberation in the church for women voices is of top priority—one that must spur reform in the black church, one that all black churchmen must be willing to support. Women’s position and authority in the ministry must be a serious matter for discussion. The black clergy of the church will be the decisive force that will affect the attitudes of all other members of the black church organization on this issue. Cone affirms the lower rung status of women in the church was modeled within the white church establishment of which the black church assimilated in kind. The women themselves had come to accept the second-class status in

¹⁷⁹ Cone, 1984, 122.

¹⁸⁰ Cone, 1984, 122.

¹⁸¹ Cone, 1984, 112.

the ministry, as ordained within the white church organization from its infancy. Cone places the blame of black women's "self-hate" of their status in the black church squarely upon the shoulders of black churchmen. It was the white racist establishment in America that caused the same inferior, internalized feelings among black Americans. Cone asserts, "That women like their place is no different from saying that blacks like theirs."¹⁸²

Nevertheless, women in the church need to be heard and men in the church need to listen. Black women in the church need to be granted a platform to share their life experiences in relation to their pain and the struggle for liberation. Cone points out how it has never been easy for the oppressor to listen from the position of being all-powerful. The empowered is reluctant to lend an ear to that which is in total contradiction to those standards that accommodate the oppressors' lifestyles and function, and is antithetical to their system of values.¹⁸³

Cone asserts that when it comes to sexism and its functionality within the black religious organizations and communities, one must understand it for what it really is, as an issue of racism in society as well as in the white church establishment. In this manner, sexism and racism share a commonality. If black males within the church fail to see the correlation between sexism and racism, then they will not come to fully understand the complexity of the problems that sexism causes.¹⁸⁴

For black men to come to understand the complexities and effects of sexism, Cone feels attention can be focused to more literature detailing the historical battles, pain, and hardships of the lives and experiences of women, particularly in the areas of third world civilizations, black American communities, and especially within the black church establishment. Cone expresses the indifferences that whites have shown towards the sufferings and hardships experienced by

¹⁸² Cone, 1984, 137.

¹⁸³ Cone, 1984, 137.

¹⁸⁴ Cone, 1984, 137.

blacks, black men within the black church have reciprocated with that same indifference in having any interest understanding the history and struggles of black women in either society or the black church establishment.¹⁸⁵

Cone emphasizes that as black women assert themselves more in their personal growth and development into formidable leaders with a strong active voice, black men have a duty to give their support. Black women within the black churches are defining their own brand of leadership roles within the church as opposed to conforming to those standards of leadership roles structured for them by black male leaders in the black church. Black people and all other oppressed sectors of our civilization have always had to develop ministerial styles that were more appropriate for them from the cultural perspective and plain of existence of their lives and experiences. This is in opposition to the standards of the oppressors, which is antithetical to the traditional patriarchal styles of leading. This will be necessary for black women in the church as well. It is the responsibility of the black churchmen to embrace new ministerial styles, as well as other methodologies of leadership, which will be a source of encouragement on the part of all members within the black church congregations. They will be more receptive to black women and the way in which they chose to lead.¹⁸⁶

Furthermore, there will be an urgency for rebuke of those black men within the black church establishment that resist change rather than embrace the empowerment of black women in roles of leadership within the church and throughout society. Cone cements it perfectly when he states, “We should be prepared to lose some friends as we work for change in the patriarchal structures in black churches and seek to create one that are humane and just.”¹⁸⁷ Affirmative action is another strategy that should be implemented within the black church establishment and

¹⁸⁵ Cone, 1984, 137.

¹⁸⁶ Cone, 1984, 137–8.

¹⁸⁷ Cone, 1984, 138.

throughout society for the empowerment of the voices of black women. The ultimate goal is equal representation of black women in leadership roles within the church, representation that is proportionate to their percentage of the population. Cone asserts that it will take an aggressive and decisive plan to implement greater roles and responsibilities for black women in the church. He explains, “Blacks have used this approach vis-à-vis racism; it seems logical to apply it to the situation of black women in our churches and communities.”¹⁸⁸ Further, Cone feels the principles of affirmative action can be instrumental in the appointment of more black women within the black church to greater positions of power and authority in such roles as “bishops, pastors, general officers, stewards, and deacons.”¹⁸⁹

In Cone’s final analysis of support and empowerment of black women in the black church, he emphasizes the necessity of black men in the church to help black women to reclaim those positive “role models of the past” to identity within in their present struggles. Cone’s conversation with black women in regards to this matter awakened in him the necessity for black men to join black women in this endeavor. The mission is to reconnect with the black women throughout history, as well as those roles models that exist in the current time. They will join forces in the struggle for liberation throughout the community and the church. Cone illuminates, “Through the discovery of their sisters and mothers of the past and the creation of community in the present, self-confidence can be enhanced and the struggle for liberation strengthened.”¹⁹⁰ In the end, open conversation on the issues of empowerment of black women within the church establishment and throughout society will eradicate patriarchalism.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ Cone, 1984, 138.

¹⁸⁹ Cone, 1984, 138.

¹⁹⁰ Cone, 1984, 138.

¹⁹¹ Cone, 1984, 138–9.

Katie Cannon echoes Cone's calling for more attention in the black church to be given in support of black womanist theology when it comes interpretive analysis of scripture. For example, Cannon's concern "is how a womanist critical evaluative process, understood in its contextual framework, can suggest possibilities for eliminating the negative and derogatory female portraiture in Black preaching."¹⁹² Cannon affirms there is an issue of certain "sermonic text" in which preachers' sermons are more "androcentric interest' and devaluating, as well as demeaning in relation to the status of black women."¹⁹³ Even in sermons of biblical stories where women occupy prominent places, Cannon affirms that women are omitted. She continues, "By unmasking those detailed and numerous androcentric injunctions, womanist hermeneutics attempts to expose the impact of phallogentric concepts that are present within black sacred rhetoric."¹⁹⁴ Cannon emphasizes the need for concern on the issues of black Christian women interpretative analysis of scriptural text and of sermons containing "linguistic sexism."¹⁹⁵ In relation to Cannon's thoughts and concerns of sexist language in sermons and patriarchies of scripture, Cannon affirms Cone's thoughts and suggestion to recognize the problem of sexism in the black church, demanding others within the church address this toward collective resolution.¹⁹⁶

In my final analysis of Cone's thoughts of the black church, I find that Cone affirms a neglected and obligated duty on the part of the black church to reach out and connect with our oppressed brothers in in third world nations. Cone considers the black church influence in areas of Asia and Latin America to be absent. He sees the necessity for communication and interaction

¹⁹² Cannon, 1995, 119.

¹⁹³ Cannon, 1995, 119.

¹⁹⁴ Cannon, 1995, 119.

¹⁹⁵ Cannon, 1995, 119.

¹⁹⁶ Cone, 1984, 137.

within these countries and the development of a plan of liberation that will also affect learning and sharing of knowledge with one another.¹⁹⁷

Cone validates that there is a collective effort on the part of Europeans, white Americans and South Africans in their effective strategy of oppressive rule over the oppressed people of our world. It is essential for oppressed people across the globe to combat this brand of oppression by coming together through communication in the struggle for liberation. Cone asserts freedom and liberation will continue to elude black people living in America, Asia, Africa, Latin America, West Indian and other oppressed nations if the world remains bound to poverty and exploitation. Cone validates that friendships and relations between the world's super powers, like America and Great Britain, once led by leaders akin to Ronald Reagan and Margret Thatcher continue to rule because of their friendly and ongoing relations between the two nations. The oppressors cleave to their strategies, keeping the oppressed people of the world suspicious and in conflict with one another, thereby creating permanent divisions. Cone explains, "As long as oppressed peoples remain ignorant and suspicious of each other, they will remain open to believing what oppressors say about the others and thus will not build a coalition movement designed for the liberation of all."¹⁹⁸

Cone affirms that oppression of people throughout our world is perpetuated by the lack of global resistance to it. The leaders of these oppressed nations are vulnerable to the opportunistic super powers that feed them misinformation, thereby keeping them suspicious and divided against one another. Division is exacerbated by the isolation of the many oppressed around the world. On the part of the black church, Cone stresses the need for interactions and communications among the oppressed people around the world. There needs to be open

¹⁹⁷ Cone, 1984, 142.

¹⁹⁸ Cone, 1984, 142.

communication in which to facilitate solidarity and cooperation between the oppressed. This will enhance the fight in the ongoing struggle for liberation. Cone put forth an inquiring and concrete question for evaluation, submitting, “We dialogue with white Americans and European, although they enslaved and colonized us and continue today to brutalize us. Why, then, do we not dialogue with other oppressed peoples who have not done anything to us and who share a condition of oppression similar to our own?”¹⁹⁹

Cone returns to the need of the black church to establish dialogue with third world nations. This must be done through the Christian sectors of those nations. The black church cannot rely upon any financial funds from the white church establishments in America or in any of the European nations. Black churches must build their own churches in various parts of the world, churches that will create privately owned meeting houses to allow dialogue to occur privately and an agenda to be formulated. The greater share of financing such projects in third world nations must be borne by the black church itself in areas of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Cone assures that it is the will and mission of the true church of Christ for the black church to administer the gospel in third world nations among the oppressed. Cone asserts, “It is a test of the authenticity of our faith in Jesus Christ is whether his will is at the top of the priority list of our black churches” This should be a top priority of the black churches among the oppressed in third world nations.²⁰⁰

There is a need for the creation of ecumenical offices, which will initiate contact with those similar third world ecumenical organizations and make contact with those organizations that already exist. Cone stresses it will demand a style of ecumenical methodology beyond all forms of typical politics found in traditional religious organizations. Cone attests to the need for

¹⁹⁹ Cannon, 1995, 142.

²⁰⁰ Cone, 1984, 143.

dialogue within the progressive wing in third world nations, identifying organizations like the “All African Conference of Churches, the Caribbean Conference of Churches, and the Christian Conference of Asia” as the starting point for black churches in small meeting conferences. This can be duplicated in Latin America as well.²⁰¹

In these initial meetings, the agenda needs to focus on sharing both cultural and historical knowledge to formulate a decisive liberating gospel. Key stakeholders in these meetings will need to pursue understanding of the differences as well as commonalities toward the greater vision in the liberation of all oppressed throughout the world as this is the message of Christ.²⁰²

²⁰¹ Cannon, 1995, 143.

²⁰² Cannon, 1995, 144.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION, ANALYSIS, AND REFLECTIONS

In my reflection of black ecclesiology in the thoughts of James H. Cone, I am impressed how Cone has captured and redefined black ecclesiology in what is the true Church in the spirit of Christ. From his Southern upbringing in a traditional southern Christian family, Cone's character and identity of a trailblazing black theologian was established. He was determined to redefine the true gospel of Christ and the church from historical, cultural, social, economic, political, and black experience of oppression that called for that spawning of a black theological perspective of the gospel in the struggle and liberation of the poor and oppressed through the world. Cone brilliantly accomplished his mission in this task in his lifetime.

In the words of Gustavo Gutierrez, "Poverty of the poor is not a call to generous relief action, but a demand that we go and build a different social order."²⁰³ It is in this thought that James H. Cone has clearly identified for me what is the true meaning and purpose of the church in its mission to spread the liberating gospel of Christ among the oppressed, poor, and disenfranchised of the world. Gustavo's thoughts identify with the black theology of James H. Cone in the affirmation of Christ that liberates the church and reflects the true spirit of Christ. Cone successfully reveals the soul of black ecclesiology from the birth of the black church out of the institution of slavery through its evolution of emancipation, Jim Crow, segregation, civil rights, and the black power era. Cone reconnected the true gospel of Christ and what black ecclesiology should be with the spoken words of Christ, recorded as follows: "The Spirit of the

²⁰³Cone, 1984, 120.

Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captive and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.”²⁰⁴

The ecclesiology of the black church is to be one with Jesus Christ in the active participation of the church with the poor, oppressed, and the outcast and exploited of this world in the ongoing struggle for freedom, equality, and liberation of God’s salvation. This is the essence of the church in its ultimate task to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth when there is justice and equality for all. In the ecclesiology of the black church, Cone’s black theology correlates the true gospel of Christ with the struggle and liberation of the oppressed. Cone’s black theological perspective derives out of the struggles of black humanity in relation to white imperial colonialism, capitalism, and exploitation. However, this black theology is not exclusive to black humanity only as this would be racist in its conception. Cone’s black theological perspective in black ecclesiology is symbolic of all that are poor are in need of the true gospel of liberation, which Cone proclaims is the mission of the true church and must be undertaken by the black church in the struggle for liberation.

In the text of *James H. Cone and Black Liberation Theology*, Rufus Burrows, Jr. poignant detail account of black humanity’s resistance and struggle for liberation from the very beginning against European imperial colonialism and capitalistic exploitation from the interior of Africa. Out of this very struggle, the black church and its ecclesiology and theology was born, giving birth to James H. Cone’s black theology of liberation. Rufus writes that it is essential for black Americans to know resistance to racial oppression and injustice and the fight for liberation has been prevalent among black humanity from the ancestral shores of Africa. The spirit of resistance and struggle began deep in the interior of Africa through the long march to the coast

²⁰⁴ Bible, ESV, 2018.

and abroad the slave ships. They fought every step of the way by whatever means necessary. Their resistance came in the form of guns, knives, sticks, starvation, and even to throwing themselves overboard in absolute protest. Rufus affirms this was the earliest acts of “black radicalism.”²⁰⁵

The white captors were without mercy and spared none in the apprehension of Africans for permanent enslavement. Their hellish spirit of oppression captured Africans of various types of skills that would promote productivity once delivered in the Americas. These captured slaves consisted of “blacksmiths, fishermen, farmers weavers, workers, chiefs, kings, priests and musicians and artisans of precious metal.”²⁰⁶ There was a definitive and defiant spirit of liberation in the soul of the ancestors that would be reborn in the African-American slave church, which would become known as the invisible institution. Burrows explains, “The Negroes who came to America directly from Africa in the eighteenth century were strikingly different from those whom generations of servitude later made comparatively docile. They were wild and turbulent in disposition and were likely at any moment to take revenge for the great wrong that had been inflicted upon them.”²⁰⁷

It is this defiant spirit of resistance in the struggle for liberation rooted in the black church and its ecclesiology that Cone affirms must be at the heart of the black church in its continuous struggle for liberation of the oppressed. Cone stressed that the white church is more of an agent of the “old society” than a representative body of God’s plan of redemption.²⁰⁸ Cone verifies that throughout history white society has supported the exploitive elements of capitalism and imperial European colonialism that has led to oppression, enslavement, poverty, starvation, and the

²⁰⁵ Burrows, 1951, 8.

²⁰⁶ Burrows, 1951, 8.

²⁰⁷ Burrows, 1951, 9.

²⁰⁸ Cone, 1969, 71.

exploitation of millions around the world. The very nature of the white church, Cone affirms, has been antithetical to the true nature of Christ's church and the spirit of the cross revealing that Christ came to deliver the oppressed and the poor.

It is in the very life of Christ itself where one finds the theology of the cross and the mission of the church. Christ spent his life among the poor and oppressed. He healed sick and set the captive free. He walked and taught among the common people of his times. He was the expressed image of the kingdom of God on earth, and he established the Kingdom among common people while shunning the secular and religious elite of his day. Jesus was the embodiment of the church during his ministry and spent his life being active among the poor and oppressed. Cone's writings appropriately affirm the true mission of the church as being an active agent in the spreading of the gospel and in the giving of love, charity, relief, and hope among the poor and oppressed of our world as directed from the scriptural text itself. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus spoke words that validate the duty of church and all members residing within the body of Christ as follows: "But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."²⁰⁹

Cone has appropriately established the true mission of the church in Christ and simultaneously affirmed the apostasy of white church from ages past. In Albert J. Raboteau's book, *Slave Religion*, he affirms the sins of the white church in America as well as in Europe that supports Cone's claims of the apostasy and nature of the white church from a historical perspective. Raboteau affirms that from the onset of the Atlantic slave trade, the westernized whites believed the enslavement of Africans provided Africans with opportunity to be Christianized as well as civilized. Raboteau provides a statement written by Gomes Eannes De

²⁰⁹ Luke 14:13–4, Bible, ESV

Azurara in relation to the arrival of newly imported West Africans to Portugal. This statement clarifies why the white church was so blind to the true mission of the church and why the white church from Europe to America would err so greatly in its relation with black humanity. Azurara observed, “The greater benefit belonged not to the Portuguese adventurers but to the captive Africans, for though their bodies were now brought into some subjection, which was a small matter in comparison of their souls, which would now possess true freedom for evermore.”²¹⁰

Furthermore, Cone’s affirmation of the apostasy of the white church from Europe to America is confirmed by Raboteau in his writings, which emphasizes the common sentiment among the European nations in their imperial colonization and capitalistic exploits that Christianization for Africans were to be a major priority of the all European missionaries in newly conquered world. This mission of the Christianization of Africans and Indians was confirmed by The Council for Foreign Plantation by Charles II in 1660.²¹¹

The European cultural ethos and the white church’s theological perspective of the white European church support for slavery which would be emulated in the America conies and the white church until present day is expressed in this historical context of the instruction given by Charles II in 1660. It reads,

And you are to consider how such of the Natives or such as are purchased by you from other parts to be servants or slaves may best be invited to the Christian faith, and be made capable of being baptized thereunto, it being to the honor of our crowne and of the Protestant Religion that all persons in any of our Dominions should be taught the knowledge of God, and be made acquainted with the mysteries of Salvation.²¹²

²¹⁰ Raboteau, 1978, 96.

²¹¹ Raboteau, 1978, 97.

²¹² Raboteau, 1978, 97.

It is in this form of hierarchical edict of ignorance where the roots of the white church were misled in the true mission of the church and in the spirit of Christ. I stand in agreement with James H. Cone on the apostasy of the white church in its support of global oppression of the poor and oppressed. In addition, Cone affirms that the twisted and confused character of the white church facilitated the establishment of the spirit of the independent black church and ecclesiology that would be forthcoming for black theologians like James H. Cone, and the establishment of the black theological perspective that exists to current day. The pivotal and decisive influence of the white church in its missionary endeavors through colonialism introduced Christianity to many totally ignorant of the life of Christ and his gospel from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Unfortunately, the white church is the cultural agent of capitalistic exploitation, as Cone affirms, and therefore, is lacking in the true liberating spirit of the Gospel of Christ that saves, and sets the captive free. It is within the black church and its ecclesiology where there have been many captives and oppressed. Cone explains that in his quest to reconcile the gospel of Christ in the struggle against poverty and oppression and in the identification of the suffering of the oppressed and poor with the suffering Christ, is where the true church is found.

From the shores of Africa, to the slave ship, and to the plantation, the black church and its ecclesiology was borne. Cone intelligently affirmed the relevance of God and the necessity of the devolvement of the black church, even if it had to begin in the Antebellum South under the institution of slavery. The start of the black church and its ecclesiology became a cultural tool of hope and faith in the invisible God of a day of liberation.²¹³

In Cone's thoughts on the slaves' innate spiritual connection with transcendent reality and their identification with the bondage and liberation of the ancient Hebrew Israelites, black humanity

²¹³ Cone, 1969, 93.

was relevant.²¹⁴ The slaves reasoned in their own intuitive instincts and their own interpretation and evaluating analysis of scripture, that chattel slavery was not consistent with the true church and spirit of Christ. It is here where I believe the development of the black theological perspective really began. Although the slaves could not put their theological and interpretative analysis of scripture and the white man's sermons into written words, they were able to discern the true gospel of Christ as being a God of love and liberation as evidenced by the ancient Israelites. The slaves concluded that same liberating eternal spirit known as God would hear their cry as well. Therefore, I reason from Cone's thoughts in the infancy of the black church that the beginning of black theological discernment of interpretation of scripture really began in the plantation slave church. However, on the official movement for the independent black church and the development of its own independent ecclesiology, I confer with James H. Cone that it was facilitated when Richard Allen and Absalom Jones walked out of St. George's Methodists Episcopal Church in 1787 and proclaimed the necessity of black ecclesiology.²¹⁵ There was no difference in the dehumanizing experience of the white churches of the South or those of the North. America experienced the birth of the spirit of the black church struggling to affirm the relevancy of black humanity and to proclaim true gospel of Christ in its relation of God's ultimate plan in the liberation of the oppressed.

The black church evolved and developed its ecclesiology through slavery, civil war, emancipation, Jim Crow, segregation, and the modern day civil rights movement. Throughout numerous periods of turmoil, the black church continued to struggle to develop and define its own ecclesiology and theology from the black experience. Today, it remains true to the nature of the church and its mission in spreading the hope and faith of the gospel to the poor and oppressed

²¹⁴ Cone, 1969, 93.

²¹⁵ Cone, 1969, 95.

worldwide. Cone appropriately affirms, “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.”²¹⁶ This black power being borne out black theology was distasteful to white Christians because black power did not have its origins in the white western Christian or theological tradition.

In conclusion, as the black church and its ecclesiology became more well-defined in the Civil Rights era of the 1950s and 1960s, the black people did not have a full understanding of black in relation to the black church and black theological development from the historical black context. For the most part, the black church in its ecumenical practice had sprung forth from the white church establishment. The raging flame of the civil rights movement, orchestrated out of the black church establishment, lost its fury with the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King in Memphis, Tennessee on April 04, 1968. As the seventies loomed, the black church did not prioritize social and political activism as it had prioritized it in the fifties. Cone affirmed the idea of black theology evolved into an issue too academic for his taste. The necessity of the church and its ecclesiology is to connect with the poor and oppressed. However, the black church wrestled with internal church structure and the building of new black religious institutions with show of power positions and status within the black church. The real issues of the black church in its ecclesiology should focus more on providing the black religious establishment with well-educated religious scholars from the best seminary institutions in the world who become better ministers and, pastors, teachers and directors and deacons in the black church ministers, and teachers.

²¹⁶ Cone, 1999, 42–3.

Cone recognized the importance of the black church in examining itself and its own ecclesiology and theology. Cone is right in his assessment that church theology must derive from one's own community and cultural and historical context to include an understanding of ancestral roots and ancestral leaders. It helps to more clearly define your theology. In it, is alignment with the gospel of Christ in relation to those who struggle against the injustice of poverty, exploitation, and oppression as well as your understanding of it all in relation to the suffering Christ and the true mission of the church.

I stand by Cone's affirmation that the black womanist thought must be heard from the theological perspective and the black church has a duty to renounce and eradicate sexism within the church. Sexism limits and obstructs the full functionality of the black feminist participation in the Kingdom of God.

Cone speaks boldly, honorably, and correctly, when he asserts that the black church establishment needs a more assertive active presence in the wilderness of third world nations. There is a call for the black church to become an active and visible agent that can be seen, touched, and experienced in the wilderness of the poor and oppressed in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Where one finds the poor and oppressed, one also will find Christ active in the mission to liberate them.

In conclusion, Cone's writings clearly identified the true spirit of Christ and the universal mission of the church. Cone affirmed the universal need for the reaffirming of that mission, regardless of whether that congregation be black, white, Hispanic or Latino. In relation to the white church and the concept of black power, Cone reveals the essence of his theological perspective that will be the salvation of all if understood in its inception and application in relation to the gospel and the nature of the church. Cone states, "Black power is the spirit of

Christ himself in the black-white dialogue which makes possible the emancipation of blacks from self-hatred and frees whites from their racism.”²¹⁷ This profound statement applies to and will affect the lives of billions around the world if it ever is achieved. I agree with Cone’s thought that it is the duty and obligation of the true church to be the active agent among the poor and oppressed as it was in the life of Christ. Cone identifies the suffering Christ with the sufferings and oppression of many in this world. Thereby it is the church’s mission to liberate the poor and oppressed and, as Cone asserts, the church as well as the Christ becomes black. The black is symbolic of the suffering of all those who are oppressed, poor, and disenfranchised in the world, even though they may not be black in actuality of skin tone.²¹⁸ The true church consists of all nations and creeds.

In relation to the church showing forth its Christian brotherhood and the world class struggle, the words of Gustavo Gutierrez from his book, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, correlates with the thoughts of James H. Cone in the church’s mission in liberating the poor and oppressed. Gutierrez affirms the concept of the church actively reflecting the universality of love in its mission must be shown in the actual ongoing history and struggle of the church in its mission. This affirms Cone’s position on the true nature of the church and its purpose to liberate the oppressed. Gutierrez states:

²¹⁷ Harvey and Philip, 2005, 171.

²¹⁸ Harvey and Goff, 2005, 171–2.

To love all men does not mean avoiding confrontations; it does not mean preserving a fictitious harmony. Universal love is that which in solidarity with the oppressed seeks also to liberate the oppressors from their own power, from their ambition, and from their selfishness: Love for those who live in a condition of objective sin demands that we struggle to liberate them from it.”²¹⁹

Here one finds the very essence of Dr. Martin Luther King’s theology in his ideology that was essential in showing the oppressor love and in gaining the oppressors’ recognition of their own sins, thereby liberating the oppressors and their victims during the civil rights movement. King spoke, “We are reaching for equality and justice in our emancipated state. God must be kept out front as the sword, shield and in all Christ like actions.”²²⁰

Gutierrez furthermore stresses the ultimate liberation of the poor and oppressed in our world will come through combatting those that own the means of production, wealth, money, and power in our world, all of which facilitate the class struggle. In affirming the mission as defined by James H. Cone in his Black theology of the church, Gutierrez asserts the active, universal agent of love will descend from that “level of abstraction” and manifest itself by becoming “incarnate” on the ongoing fight in liberating those that are oppressed.²²¹

The church resides within a world divided against itself according to class stratification. This creates antagonism among the social classes. This person of different social classes also resides within the church. Gutierrez affirms that Christians within the churches that are from different social classes create division within the Christian community itself.²²² He also affirms that there must be unity in the church to fulfill the mission of the true church. Gutierrez sees this

²¹⁹ Gutierrez, 1971, 275.

²²⁰ King and Carson, 2006, 60.

²²¹ Gutierrez, 1971, 275.

²²² Gutierrez, 1971, 276–7.

unity as “a gift of God and a historical conquest of man” in an ongoing process facilitates humanity’s ability to transcend all that causes humankind to be divided against itself in constant opposition. Here is church ecclesiology that must be adopted if it wants to embody the spirit of Christ.

James H. Cone has declared the essentiality of black ecclesiology in his own thoughts. His theology was formulated out of his life, culture, and experiences of a black man struggling to define himself first and a theological perspective that is relational to the struggle, suffering, and ancestry of his own people. Against the backdrop of the class struggle of racism, sexism, classism, and oppression, James H. Cone affirms the relevancy of black humanity, as well the true nature of the church and the gospel of Christ, which declares, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.”²²³ This is the liberating gospel of Christ. In this passage of scriptural text, I believe that James H. Cone brought forth black theology in the ecclesiology of the black church to affirm the liberating spirit of the gospel of Christ and the nature and mission of Christ’s church in the ultimate salvation of who are oppressed of this world, as he was oppressed while he was here.

In James H. Cone’s final thoughts from his last book called *Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody*, Cone acknowledges the element of racism in America from its infancy until now—one that has been perpetuated by white supremacy, one of this nation’s “original sins.” Through the gospel of Christ, we receive that divine message of liberation; however, as Cone asserts, “Any theology in America that fails to engage white supremacy and God’s liberation of black people

²²³ Luke 4:18, Bible, ESV.

from that evils is not Christian theology but a theology of the antichrist.”²²⁴ With this, I agree.

²²⁴ Cone, 2018, 18

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