

DRAKE UNIVERSITY

# Theory of the Black Christ

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Religion Capstone

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**Abstract – This thesis covers the theory of the Black Christ in the context of Black liberation theology. Discussion of what the Black Christ actually is and means culminates in the discussion of the origins of the Black Christ, prevalence of this image among the African American community and mainstream culture, as well as its prospects and place in the varying spectrum of contemporary theologies.**



The image of Christ has taken countless different forms since the formation of Christianity nearly 2000 years ago, all of which seek to fulfill a purpose for making a more personal and meaningful Christianity. These images in mainstream culture have shifted over the course of time, ingraining particular assumptions about the persona of this historical and spiritual figure, and leading popular discourse about Christianity. However, in America particularly, the race of Jesus is something not often brought to the forefront of religious dialogue among traditional denominations. Often times, the color of Christ is taken for granted, meaning very little to the "typical" Christian. But, for one particular theology, the race of Jesus is of the utmost importance. Black Liberation theology takes into account the race of Jesus as a central factor not only for how Christ should be portrayed, but additionally, as a symbol of what is wrong with the traditional understanding of American Christianity. Generally speaking, Black liberation theology argues that it is important to think in terms of a Black Christ, as it deals with the problems of traditional Christianity from many different angles. These aspects are discussed in five sections that attempt to comprehensively cover the conception of the Black Christ from past, to present, to future.

Part I discusses the origins of Black liberation theology and where the idea of the Black Christ came from. Particularly important is the understanding of African religion and how it differs from Western theologies. From Africa, traditions were brought to America and fused with Christianity to create a new kind of theology that remained largely unrecognized by mainstream culture until the 1970s.

Part II articulates the tenants of Black liberation theology. During the 1970s, Black liberation theology argued that being black and being Christian were not contradictory statements. It affirmed a message of liberation from the oppressive society controlled largely by White Americans. As with slavery, Whites were using religion to justify racism and other acts against people of color, hoping to maintain a status quo that suppressed the legitimacy of African Americans in both public and religious spheres. Theories articulated by theologian James Cone will play a central part in this section, and transition into a more focused study of the Black Christ in particular.

Part III takes up the question of the significance of having a Black Christ, and the theological necessity to do so. There is a correlation between relating stories of the Old Testament and the way Jesus should be imagined. Out of this premise, two different versions of the Black Christ emerge; one spiritual and one historical. The spiritual Christ is explained as one that seeks to support the claim of a communal society of Christians that rejects the power structure of White society.<sup>1</sup> The historical image compliments that by arguing that Jesus must be changed from white to black in order to remove any conceptions that connote oppression of a particular people. Both historical and spiritual theories encourage the upheaval of traditional White Christianity. Black liberation theology and the Black Christ are also critiqued by outside theologians from several different perspectives.

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<sup>1</sup> To clarify, throughout this essay there will be reference to white and White, as well as black and Black. Using a method articulated by James Cone, black and white will refer to the physical race of individuals, whereas White will be referred to as an identity of privilege, and Black a categorization of oppression. Both Black and White individuals do not have to be racially identified as such, rather, as will be explained in Part III, they embody particular characteristics and experiences that make them such.

Part IV analyzes how well these theories have been implemented. The importance here is the notion of community, tracing back to African roots. Black Christians have taken several aspects from the Black Christ in theory, and acted to improve their own understandings about faith and life, as well as making a positive impact in their surrounding community. Imagining a black Jesus alters the methods African Americans use to associate with their community through more active political and social participation.

Part V looks at the future prospects for Black liberation theology and the Black Christ. There is a detailed examination of the reception of Black liberation theology by mainstream culture as well as the Black community at large. Ultimately, both the media and other elites in society are relatively hostile towards Black liberation theology for its attacks on the power structure. Additionally, Black liberation theology has remained relatively contained within the Black community, making progress for expansion possible, but not likely in the near future. There is also an analysis about the potential for a post racial age through using the Black Christ as a model for mainstream Christianity.

These aspects all culminate in the place that the Black Christ has not only in Black liberation theology but in mainstream society as well, and how this image plays an important factor in the tone of religious debate in particular theological circles. Like any theology, it has its supporters and critics, but in the end, Black liberation theology makes the claim that its portrayal of Jesus is the most relevant to our time period and is the most authentically Christian symbol in society today.

## Part I – Origins of Black Liberation Theology

From the 17<sup>th</sup> to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Americans engaged in the practice of slavery with only a minimal resistance until the rapid escalation of the Civil War and eventual abolition. However, during this time period, it is critical to examine the situation of African and African American slaves, primarily for the purpose of creating a foundation for the creation of Black liberation theology later on in time. Of course, black slaves brought their own religious perspective from Africa to the Americas, despite how vehemently Western Whites may have denied this assumption.<sup>2</sup> Without the tendency to believe things in terms of understanding the notion of the afterlife (like heaven and hell, and the actions required to get to either one), Africans saw life as a “tight cosmology” in which everything was interconnected.<sup>3</sup> They placed high value in communion not only with their own community, but with everything around them. As a result, Africans often believed that they shared a common bond with nature (and everything derived from nature), and they were able to relate to the experiences of their brothers and sisters, even if it was something they had not experienced themselves. This pervasive spirituality was evident in the New World, allowing Africans to create a sense of togetherness with other slaves who may have had “few common ties among themselves”, yet were bound together by a very general shared belief (which later was only reinforced by Christianity).<sup>4</sup>

On the opposite side of the fence, one of the most notable problems slave owners had to face in regards to dealing with their slaves was the disparity of culture and the assumed barbarism of these dark skinned people. With the slaves’ limited exposure to major “world religions” (Christianity in particular), Westerners generally viewed the belief systems of Africans “as uncivilized, backwards, archaic, and even harmful”.<sup>5</sup> With this mindset, slave owners quickly sought to eradicate the heretical belief from their slaves the only way they knew how; through conversion. Of course, many slave owners felt that teaching their slaves the Christian faith would create various problems.<sup>6</sup> Primarily, this shared experience of religion could very well allow slaves to consider themselves as more equal to their owners now that they were of the same religious viewpoint that stressed Christians as brothers and sisters with one another.

This fear was curbed by other Christians who argued that slavery and Christianity were indeed compatible, and that there was an inherent Western superiority proscribed through its teachings. One of the best examples of this was the seen through the image of Jesus. Both in a physical and rhetorical way, Christ was portrayed as a white male in

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<sup>2</sup> The primary denial of African religion was predicated off of the conception of what can be considered a “world religion” in the Western sense of religion containing a God, canon, or spiritual/prophetic figures, as well as dealing with other ultimate questions about human existence (e.g. the afterlife). African spiritual belief had none of these characteristics, and thus was regarded as a cultural anomaly and not actually a religion.

<sup>3</sup> Sweet, James H. Recreating Africa culture, kinship, and religion in the African-Portuguese world, 1441-1770. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina P, 2003. 105-108.

<sup>4</sup> There are literally thousands of individualistic African communities, often times having their own form of communication, independent from any other tribe. As a result, it was sometimes difficult for first and second generation African slaves to find ways to relate to one another on the plantations. Klein, Herbert, and Stuart B. Schwartz. The Atlantic Slave Trade. New York: Cambridge UP, 1999. 173.

<sup>5</sup> Lopes, Nei. "African Religions in Brazil, Negotiation, and Resistance: A Look from Within." Journal of Black Studies 34.6 (July 2004): 839.

<sup>6</sup> Klein, 175.

congregations throughout America, and this emphasis was reinforced through the use of blackness as the opposite of the white light and goodness.<sup>7</sup> Playing off the polarization of colors, Europeans were able to construct a racial status of Africans, ultimately equating them as less than fully human, and thus less deserving of full recognition in the Church. Ultimately, despite how much Christians wanted to evangelize their slaves, it only extended to a point where Europeans felt comfortable in thinking that their authority would not be challenged. Simply put, Africans were not considered fully Christian, making it inconsistent to be both Christian and black for subsequent generations. Physical images, particularly the White Christ, constantly reinforced this ideal.

But despite the best efforts to convert African slaves in the Americas, the native religions of their former homes were not that easily erased. The very essence of African understanding of religion was beneficial in blending their beliefs with those of Christians. The "African perspective of adaptability, courage, openness to change, and practicality to synthesize their fragmented knowledge of both African and European religious perspectives" allowed them to use Christianity in unison with their own belief system, as they were not necessarily incompatible with one another (e.g. the collective nature of African belief and the Christian Church as emphasizing interconnectedness of being sisters and brothers in Christ).<sup>8</sup> Since the communal nature of Christ and the communal nature of African tradition were harmonious with one another, Christianity was slowly absorbed by slaves, yet not in the same manner slave owners had wanted or expected. There was a clear disparity between the goal of slave submission, and what actually happened.

While slave owners were eventually successful in removing African religion from the mainstream of slave society (through a combination of Christianization and prohibitions on practicing African religions), their effectiveness did not mean the elimination of African religion.<sup>9</sup> Rather, it drove African practices underground, many times disguising itself in the veil of Christianity.<sup>10</sup> Reverend Jeremiah Wright puts it in biblical terms, relating Babylonians to the European captors:

"They had taken away [the slave's] heritage and taught him Babylonian literature, language and philosophy. But when they tried the ultimate take-away—when they tried to take away his religion—they did what all oppressors do: they tried to take away his hope... When they tried to take away his hope, they found out that their trying was in vain."<sup>11</sup>

This claim is indicative of the African spirituality embedded within African Americans, which slave owners and other whites could never remove. This innate religion, Wright claims, is so sacred that not even a Babylonian effort could remove the core of true African beliefs. Yet regardless of how effective (or ineffective) the effort was to completely remove any native religious understanding from African slaves,

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<sup>7</sup> i.e. blackness was seen as a representation of evil and immorality. Whitted, Qiana. "In My Flesh Shall I See God: Ritual Violence and Racial Redemption in 'The Black Christ.'" African American Review 38.3 (Fall 2004): 379.

<sup>8</sup> Encyclopedia of African and African-American religions. New York: Routledge, 2001. 302.

<sup>9</sup> Lopes, 846.

<sup>10</sup> Tishken, Joel E. "Ethnic vs. Evangelical Religions: Beyond Teaching the World Religion Approach." The History Teacher 33 (May 2000): 318.

<sup>11</sup> Wright, Jr., Jeremiah A. "Words from the Pulpit: Faith in a Foreign Land." Cross Currents 57.2 (Summer 2007): 248.

generations of forced education in Christianity began to change how Africans articulated their religion into more Christocentric terms. Through constant reference to Biblical teaching and forced indoctrination into the religious system of the Christian faith, progress was slowly being made, and later generations of African American slaves were beginning to consider themselves more and more Christian.<sup>12</sup> Ironically, indoctrination into Christian culture did not end the problems whites had of forcing blacks to accept their condition as slaves.

After the Africans' slow accommodation to Christianity, there began to be a shift in the understanding of what it actually meant to be both Christian and a slave. While previously mentioned, even though many Europeans had denied full status as Christians to Africans on the basis of particular constructions of Christianity, slaves began to read and interpret the Bible in their own manner. It became necessary for Africans to "live their faith within the context of their own cultures and... worship had to be made relevant, intelligible and meaningful to the people."<sup>13</sup> Basically, slaves had difficulty accepting the dual notions of what it meant to be a Christian (according to whites), and at the same time believing in a loving and just God (in the light of their own experiences in bondage). It is through this disconnect that the first shadows of an anti-white Christ emerge. In interpreting the message of the Bible, there was a growing belief among slaves that whites had been using the cross as a symbol for conquest and forced conversion for too long.<sup>14</sup> But despite the best efforts by slave owning Christians to rebuff this claim (and in effect, keep the traditional theology that maintained a power structure that benefited whites over any other race), slaves could not ignore what they saw as blatant hypocrisy in religious practice.<sup>15</sup> They did not give in to this white notion of Christianity, as they knew something was inherently wrong (based off their own treatment as being regarded as less than human). This rejection of the White Christ did not leave void in black spiritual practice, rather it led inextricably to a construction of their own.

Out of the desire to find a more compatible Christianity with the slaves' beliefs, a religion arose that focused on the idea of liberation from oppression. Slaves began to read the stories of the death of Christ by the hands of his oppressors and the Exodus from Egypt as a parallel to their own situation.<sup>16</sup> Strangely, while these stories played a crucial role in the Bible, they were aspects never mentioned by the Christian slave owners who were constantly encouraging slaves to worship and submit to their White Christ. Slowly, a rough theology came to life (often times combined with the remnants of African

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<sup>12</sup> O'Toole, Sarah. "Religion, society and culture in the colonial era." A Companion to Latin American History (Blackwell Companions to World History). By Thomas H. Holloway. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008. 163.

<sup>13</sup> Djité, Paulin G. "From liturgy to technology: Modernizing the languages of Africa." Language Problems & Language Planning 32.2 (Summer 2008): 136.

<sup>14</sup> Douglas, Kelly Brown. What's Faith Got to Do With It? Black Bodies/Christian Souls. New York: Orbis Books, 2005. 54.

<sup>15</sup> Sweet, 211.

<sup>16</sup> This is the biblical narrative in the Book of Exodus where the figure Moses, on God's behalf, spoke to the Pharaoh of Egypt and demanded that the Israelite slaves (who were named God's chosen people) be released from their bondage. After Pharaoh rebuked Moses' request, God sent a plague to change Pharaoh's mind each time. Eventually, Pharaoh released the slaves, but quickly regretted the decision and pursued Moses and the Israelites, and was eventually drowned by God's hand in the Dead Sea. The Israelites were subsequently freed and promised a land of their own by God.

heritage) that defied their position as black, Christian slaves.<sup>17</sup> This theology claimed that if there was a God, and he had mercy towards those who were most persecuted (as God did in the Bible), then ultimately slaves were truly the blessed ones, or rather, these white Christians were abusing the image of Christ and power of God for their own gain. While this was an initially contained movement, relegated to individual plantations and slave communities, it did not stay that way. Those proponents of this way of thinking sought to expand this message to a wider audience by several methods. Communication was a serious obstacle in the way of these slave theologians, but there were ways that Africans and African Americans attempted to express their understanding to the white community. While violence was certainly a tool that many slaves used to reject their bondage (in terms of militant Christianity), others began to engage in conversations with whites with the hopes that they could further advance their cause by revealing the fallacy in the White Christ and God.<sup>18</sup> By explaining the evils of slavery to those who were more inclined to listen, communication of these ideas became easier and more prolific within slave communities.<sup>19</sup> It would appear that this push for freedom was a contributing factor to abolition, as many white Christians countered the slave owners' claim that slavery was ordained by God. Thus, in one sense, victory was achieved by these slaves, who were effectively able to relate their experiences as slaves and African heritage into Christian terms that many Americans could understand.

Yet it is important to note that while the understanding of a Christian theology that frees those who are oppressed originated with the African slaves' shifting of a White Christian appeal, that underlying message did not abate after the Civil War era. While the abolition of slavery may have solved the one specific issue slaves in the Americas had been focusing on, the larger issue of justice and oppression remained (primarily through the form of racism and outright discrimination based on the constructed race of blacks). For the longest time, the message of liberation in the African American community was scattered and disjointed, but finally "nearly 130 years after Nat Turner was hanged, Black theology emerged as a formal discipline."<sup>20</sup> In the United States, this Christology was best articulated in the 1970s by a theologian by the name of James Cone.<sup>21</sup> His theology created a movement that not only dealt with the issues of the time, but began to permeate the fabric of black culture in a way that still plays an important role in today's society.

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<sup>17</sup> Hopkins, Dwight N. Heart and Head: Black Theology Past, Present, and Future. New York: Palgrave, 2002. 168.

<sup>18</sup> Douglas, Kelly Brown, 41.

<sup>19</sup> Wilmore, Gayraud S. Black religion and Black radicalism an interpretation of the religious history of African Americans. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1998. 26-27.

<sup>20</sup> Battle, Michael. Black church in America African American spirituality. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2006. 99.

<sup>21</sup> This is not to diminish the contributions of other individuals who contributed to Black liberation theology, such as Albert Cleage, Deotis Roberts, or Cecil Cone, but for the sake of focus, the tenants of this theology will be expressed in Cone's terms, as they are the most widely recognized by other Black liberation theologians



## Part II – Black Liberation Theology Articulated

While the importance of Black liberation theology is a complex and intricate argument, for the sake of time and focus, the explanation of this theology will be seen primarily through the construction of Jesus Christ. The ultimate claim of Cone is that both God and Christ must be Black, because neither God nor Christ can remain neutral when dealing with an oppressed group of individuals, rather, they take the form of those who are most oppressed. That foundation being laid, there are several key aspects to this theology that can be explained through the Black Christ in helping to articulate its general rationale and objectives.

To explore what Cone means as Christ as Black, it is first important to identify what is wrong with the traditional view that God has no color and no preference towards a specific group of people. To Black liberation theologians, there is a pivotal problem in the standard of white Christianity: it has been so caught up in the power struggle and subsequent oppression of others to attain its own goal that it can no longer see its own faults.<sup>22</sup> Much as the slave theologians believed over a century earlier, traditional Christianity has become a religion devoted to individual needs and desires, creating a God that is neutral (and colorless), and takes no sides in worldly affairs. These White theologians would argue that the Bible implicates many different lines of thought, and that everyone's canon within a canon has justification. However, Cone points to the circumstances on which Christianity was founded. Even during the time of Constantine, it was a white hierarchy that ended up deciding what was most important to put into the Bible, and consciously or not, these oppressors were careful to make sure they did not lose any personal power or authority while spreading "the Word of God".<sup>23</sup> It is this very premise that gives cause for alarm for the Black theologian. Traditional Christianity is intrinsically tied with the loaded concepts of racial bias and prejudice, an argument rarely heard by White theologians. An example of this is the mainstream notion of Christ as being depicted as a white male. Whether conscious or not, this image reinforces the dominance of white culture over any other cultural or historical understanding of Jesus. Being white and being Christ-like is an example often taken for granted, as opposed to viewing Jesus as a minority, which would normally evoke a response of surprise or bewilderment. Yet even because of assertions like this, Cone does not say the Bible is fallible in its message, rather he goes on to infer that even despite the overbearing control of White theology, there is still proof that both God and Christ are indeed Black.

While traditional theology may be inherently biased, and Whites have unknowingly distorted and misunderstood that message, Cone notes that God is still able to get the true Christian message through. Moving momentarily to the Old Testament, the Exodus from Egypt provides the foundation for assuming God is active as a liberator. Here, the Israelites, God's chosen people, suffered under the reign of Pharaoh, unable to free themselves on their own. God's options were clear (as the One who had the power to decide who was truly righteous); do nothing and in effect side with the oppressors by allowing the slaves' oppression to continue, or act and free the Israelites.<sup>24</sup> God chose the latter, and in doing so, became the God of the oppressed.

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<sup>22</sup> Cone, James H. Black theology of liberation. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1990. 19.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 30.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 70.

Cone goes on to argue that over time, the oppressive nature of society has not changed.<sup>25</sup> From one form of slavery to another, blacks have been arguably the most oppressed group in our modern era. In theory, "Black people all share in the unique historical distinction of having their claim to being fully human constantly and systematically refuted".<sup>26</sup> In other words, while poverty, subjugation, and oppression can manifest itself in other categories of people (e.g. women, homosexuals, or Latinos to name a few), blacks have the distinction of being an enslaved, slaughtered, and denigrated category of people throughout American history.<sup>27</sup> Enduring slavery and inequality, blacks were treated as less than human, left to pick at the scraps of the dominant (white) society. Cone states that even now, decades after slavery and the Civil Rights movement, blacks are still the oppressed. Even benefits to minorities do not solve this issue of oppression, primarily because blacks are first forced to accept the conditions that whites have set in place before they can be given help. And generally speaking, no group holding power, whether it is a government or leaders of a theological perspective, will be willing to give that up.<sup>28</sup> As difficult as it is to accept, the balance is inherently set against people of color. This can be best articulated through the claim that "those who are in charge of the racial discussion are the ones who don't have to worry about race on an everyday basis."<sup>29</sup> Whites often times do not go about their day consciously contemplating how the color of their skin will help them or hurt them in their everyday interactions with others; blacks still do. In order to be regarded as worthy of being part of mainstream culture, blacks literally be able to prove themselves willing and able to submit to the status quo already in place. Thus in encouraging blacks to accept White charity and play by White rules to get ahead, there is only the propagation of the system of oppression.

Now if the oppressive nature of society (and religion) has not changed since the Exodus, then God's nature has not changed either.<sup>30</sup> Like God did for the Israelites in the deserts of Egypt, God will also do for the blacks in the ghettos of America, and there is biblical proof that this is the case. It is here we come to our first theologically articulated construction of a Black Christ. In the Bible, God saw the suffering of the Jews at the hands of the Romans and corrupt religious leaders, and partook in that suffering by becoming flesh in Jesus Christ. By following the traditional understanding that God is Jesus in flesh, "Cone is able to build his constructive theology in such a way that allows him to emphasize the concrete historical existence and character of Jesus as the 'Oppressed One' who identified with and sought the liberation of the oppressed of the land."<sup>31</sup> Jesus sees the injustice of his current situation and fights against it, giving hope to those who are oppressed and downtrodden by society (even as traditional Christianity muddled with Christ to fit in with its own theology). In the Bible, we are given countless

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 44.

<sup>26</sup> Davis, Konright. "Jesus Christ and Black Liberation: Toward a Paradigm of Transcendence." *Journal of Religious Thought* 42.1 (Spring/Summer 1985): 53.

<sup>27</sup> It is important to mention that the oppression of these other out groups is not discounted in Black liberation theology and will be discussed later.

<sup>28</sup> Cone, 38.

<sup>29</sup> Battle, 27.

<sup>30</sup> Cone, 121.

<sup>31</sup> Siker, Jeffrey S. "Historicizing a Racialized Jesus: Case Studies in the "Black Christ," the "Mestizo Christ," and White Critique." *Biblical Interpretation* 15.1 (Jan. 2007): 31.

narratives of Jesus acting in a manner that is beneficial to those considered the scourge of society, while condemning those who made the rules. If there is an altruistic nature of the Bible that transcends time and culture, then certainly Jesus' goals for those who are least in society and against those who hold oppressive authority have not changed either.<sup>32</sup>

Yet the idea of Black liberation theology does not stop simply with the life of Christ as important for the oppressed. Cone argues that the point of Christ being crucified and resurrected was more than to show he was a good man who sympathized with the poor.<sup>33</sup> The resurrection of Jesus allows those who are oppressed to see that they do not have to live in fear of the violence of oppression, because Jesus Christ is the actual incarnation (a physical symbol) of the defeat of the oppressive society. Those who have been disenfranchised by society have an iconic figure to look to in order derive some sort of meaning from their struggle. God has never been neutral when it comes to siding with the oppressed, and thus the argument that Christ (as an incarnation of God) is white or colorless is ludicrous. God already recognizes the oppressed as Black (whether or not any form of oppression is recognized by the ruling White society), and subsequently, God becomes Black with the oppressed (as God cannot be just and righteous by remaining neutral and isolated from human oppression).

While the idea of Black liberation theology is certainly more complex and nuanced than this, this brief summation suffices in the purpose of exploring the importance of the Black Christ in modern life. And of course, it is important to note that with the growth of this theological movement, scrutiny has been leveled at its ideas from all different angles. One of the largest areas of complaint is the idea that restricting the conversation to a battle between black people as oppressed and white people as the oppressors leaves out all the other oppressed groups in society, and marginalizes other forms of oppression as second to that of being black. Additionally, with the rise of blacks to positions of power in mainstream society and out of oppression, there was another complication with the black/white comparison. Black liberation theology responded by adjusting the understanding of what it actually means to be black by stating that this color dichotomy was merely an archetype for the larger argument, and those who had dark skin were not necessarily Black, while those with light skin were not automatically White.<sup>34</sup> As critic Jeffery Siker states:

“Significantly, Cone concedes that ‘blackness’ as a Christological title ‘may not be appropriate in the distant future or even in every human context in our present,’ but the significance of the title rests not with its universality, but precisely in its particularity.”<sup>35</sup>

Returning to the idea that blacks have a special condition with their enslavement and denigration throughout American history, right now, the claim made by black Americans is that the system that enslaved them (as well as oppressed women and other minorities) still exists today, only in a less obvious form. Thus, to be Black, one is required to fight against a system that is inherently set against traditionally oppressed

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<sup>32</sup> Of course, Cone does not infer that oppression has to be a conscious decision. Like many of the religious leaders during the time of Christ, many times those who are oppressing are unable to see the effects of their actions, because they fail to move beyond their limited perspective in which all the benefits of inclusion into society have been granted to them.

<sup>33</sup> Cone, 118.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 94.

<sup>35</sup> Siker, 33.

groups and in effect renounce any privilege bestowed by White society.<sup>36</sup> As a result, the goal of Black liberation theology became a force not only to help African Americans (although that is how it started), but to aid the most oppressed in society. Yet despite this readjustment, there is still recognition of the original claim of oppressed blackness, and how these theologians believed Jesus had been stripped of his true message and transformed into this false prophet that supported the tyrants of society. Black liberation theology calls the oppressed to take back Christ and restore him to his true nature.

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<sup>36</sup> One of the clearest examples of this can be seen in the United State Congress. While African Americans, Latinos, and women make up an impressive percentage of our society, they only make up a marginal percentage of representation in either of the houses of Congress. For the most part, only those who have proven that they will not disrupt the system set in place (that generally benefits the dominant class) are allowed to participate as a reward for their submission. Regardless of their race, Cone would not consider these people to be Black, as they give into maintaining the status quo.

### Part III – Theories of the Black Christ

While it was mentioned previously that the Black Christ has an important role in Black liberation theology, and that this movement could be represented through him, it is prevalent to explore the meaning of that claim through an analysis about the nature of Jesus in this movement. Within theological circles, one of the central debates over how a Black Jesus Christ should be constructed must be addressed before moving forward. Two perspectives, one of a historically black Jesus and one of a spiritually Black Christ, are weighted and leveled out against one another. At the beginning of the Black liberation theology movement, these theologians came to realize that White Christians had distorted both the spiritual and historical nature of Jesus.<sup>37</sup> They had essentially made Jesus into a white (and some claimed, racist) capitalist. As Blacks saw this creation of Christ as blatant hypocrisy to the true Christian message, these two aspects had to be rebuilt in a manner that satisfied both theological and historical angst. To explain further, the difference between a historical Jesus and spiritual Christ is not merely rhetorical, but rather deals with the sensitive issue of how much it truly matters that Jesus was Black in either regard. To talk of the spiritual Christ, theologians focus on the actions of Jesus and the message that he represents through Christianity. The historical Jesus, on the other hand, is one that seeks to uncover the true Jesus, and why it would be important if his skin color, ethnicity, and cultural perspectives are in fact black. Not only do both sides provide a more complete picture of the construction of Jesus, but they help to give a deeper insight into the unique views Black liberation theology.

Out of this debate, the spiritual Black Christ seems to have been engaged with the most vigor. Generally, Black theologians argue the message of Christ was derived from God's desire to help the oppressed. Thus, Christ must be constantly reevaluated and his color and appearance changed to reflect those who God is truly supporting. This is important for the everyday Christian because "Jesus' disciples are called to identify themselves with the crucified, and in doing so create different kinds of communities that resist violence in the same way God does – never giving up on human community."<sup>38</sup> Essentially, the oppressed becomes one with Christ because they share in his struggle for liberation. It is this allowance for diversity and shifting appeal of the Christ that allows Blacks to return Jesus to a figure that represents abhorrence of oppression. This can be justified most clearly through the stories of the Old Testament (primarily that of the Exodus from Egypt), and thus, a more coherent stream of thought is created that permits Jesus to be seen in a different light. Using Moses as an archetype, some Black liberation theologians see Christ not only as liberating those from oppression (as a revolutionary man), but as a salvific figure as well (as the Son of God).<sup>39</sup> This Old Testament reinterpretation means that not only is God on their side, but God is actively showing the oppressed support by sending Jesus to physically aid them.<sup>40</sup> This fusion of Christ into other biblical stories are important because it reinforces the idea that it is God who is the One ultimately deciding to side with the oppressed, and will act in any method necessary

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<sup>37</sup> Moore, R. Laurence. Touchdown Jesus the mixing of sacred and secular in American history. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox P, 2003. 103.

<sup>38</sup> Battle, 31.

<sup>39</sup> Prothero, Stephen. American Jesus How the Son of God Became a National Icon. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003. 228.

<sup>40</sup> Much as God had communicated with Moses directly to free the oppressed, similarities can be seen in the instance of Jesus.

to accomplish those ends (even going so far as to send the Son on Man down to earth). As will be discussed later, this synthesis of Old and New Testament stories brings into question the relevance of Jesus in comparison to these other stories of liberation throughout the Bible (in the sense of determining what stories tend to take more precedence in Black liberation theology).

While the spiritual Christ embodies the struggle of Blacks through reinforcement of the biblical liberation theme, the concern is raised over the physical portrayal of Jesus. One cannot keep the image of the White Christ while portraying a completely different message, as the heart of the problem would still remain.<sup>41</sup> To avoid this question, theologians like James Cone began to discuss the physical nature of Christ, and the importance of Jesus being Black, or rather the importance of disregarding the White Christ as false and inherently wrong. Critics, like Siker, often express exasperation with the idea that “on the one hand [theologians like] Cone can say that the historical Jesus matters tremendously. Yet on the other hand Cone has very little patience for the historical Jesus work conducted by the (white) academy.”<sup>42</sup> However, the rebuke from Black liberation theology comes in the form of skepticism towards White academia. They claim that Whites have constructed Jesus in the image of a white male since the time of slavery, and it has reached an extent to where the whiteness of Christ has become common sense in mainstream America. Along with this is the notion that it is the winners who write history, and Whites could well be considered in that category of dominance. For Cone, as well as many other Black liberation theologians, it is necessary to break this “common sense” understanding that can often condition individuals to ignore injustices and oppression going on right in front of their eyes.<sup>43</sup> Ultimately, when Black artists and theologians alike attempt to make sense of what Jesus as a man should stand for, “the benevolent, life-affirming qualities that are associated with Christ can be undermined by the politics of race when Jesus is figured in the image of an oppressor.”<sup>44</sup> Simply put, Blacks have difficulty seeing the good in Jesus when he is in the same image of Whites who have constantly acted in a manner that often disenfranchises the Black community. Whether this is a conscious decision or not, from their position at the bottom of the social ladder, Blacks see this much more clearly than those who have the benefits of Whiteness do.

Of course, to clarify, there is not necessarily a unified message of condemnation of the image of the White Christ. Other Black liberation theologians, like Gayraud Wilmore, claim that Whites should be entitled to appreciate the white Jesus with as much legitimacy as Blacks have to portray a black Christ.<sup>45</sup> It is seen as more practical than

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<sup>41</sup> That problem being that White culture has a tendency to think in terms of racial superiority, and that keeping the White Christ would ultimately still be giving credence to White theology as somehow relevant. Billingsley, Andrew. *Mighty Like a River The Black Church and Social Reform*. New York: Oxford UP, USA, 2003. 87.

<sup>42</sup> Siker, 34.

<sup>43</sup> Omi, Michael. *Racial formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 67.

<sup>44</sup> Whitted, Qiana. "In My Flesh Shall I See God: Ritual Violence and Racial Redemption in "The Black Christ." *African American Review* 38.3 (Fall 2004): 384.

<sup>45</sup> Hopkins, Dwight. "Black Theology of Liberation." *Modern Theologians an Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918 (The Great Theologians)*. By David Ford. Grand Rapids: Blackwell, Incorporated, 2005. 456.

stating that the oppressor's views must be revoked and abhorred when most of the time, these strongly held beliefs have been embedded in an individual's mind throughout their entire life. To simply force one to abandon the Christ they have perceived as founding their moral base and understanding of every aspect of spirituality would take a superhuman effort for any White Christian. Instead, Whites' faith should be redefined through the use of Black liberation theology. In this manner, "the inclusivity of other identities and the lack of threat of others in Christ, the Black Church can consider the relationship of others as bettering the identity of self," while encouraging those who disagree to engage in a dialogue to defend and define what their Jesus stands for.<sup>46</sup> The alternative theological view perceives an effort with just as much energy and conviction, but sees liberation in the form of reconditioning Whites to see their own oppressive structure more clearly. Yet regardless of this debate over the validity of a white Jesus, Black liberation theology maintains that it is necessary to redefine what Jesus means in terms of the oppressed Black community. This ultimately creates a situation in which the historical black Jesus and the spiritual Black Christ come to a front in ultimately culminating in a figure that accurately represents both the spiritual and physical struggles of Blacks.

Over the course of the past four decades, Black liberation theology has received significant criticism, particularly on the issue of defining the Black Christ. Perhaps surprisingly, some of the most vocal criticism has come from theologies that have actually derived from Black liberation theology. One of the most prevalent of these emerging counterparts to Black liberation theology is Womanist theology. While there is a similar desire for liberation from the oppressive power structure of mainstream society, there is dual recognition not only of the factor of racial superiority, but gender as well. In the view of these theologians, it is important to recognize that our culture has been a male dominated society as much as a White dominated society, and there are a good number of individuals who have to face this oppressive structure on both fronts.<sup>47</sup> Looking to Black liberation theology, Womanist theologians argue that the theme of liberation should not be restricted simply to the basis of color, rather expanded to realize that by widening the periphery of this theological perspective, oppressive structures exist in many different masked forms. Essentially, Womanists claim that Black liberation theology has managed to ignore other categories of people who have been unfairly subjected to a system that disenfranchises.<sup>48</sup> Many Black theologians have themselves been blinded by the "common sense" understandings of the way society is structured, and as a result, seeking liberation from Whites has only reinforced the oppressive system against woman. While other theologies have echoed this call (such as gay and feminist theologies), Womanist theology best puts the criticisms of Black liberation theology from within into context. One of the greatest cases in point is the focus of the power of Jesus Christ not simply as the Son of God, but as a man as well. Womanist theologians challenge the claim that Jesus' maleness has anything to do with his power of liberation, and that these common sense assumptions do not properly categorize the struggles of the minority (as Jesus

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<sup>46</sup> Battle, 175.

<sup>47</sup> Terrell, JoAnne Marie. Power in the blood? The cross in the African American experience. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1998. 132.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 135.

maleness is placed on a pedestal without any particular reason other than tradition).<sup>49</sup> Some other Womanist (and feminist) theologians even state that the focus should be on the feminine aspects of Jesus during the time period (like his love and nonviolence to attain ends) in the same manner that Jesus' spiritual and historical Blackness is highlighted as a way to reveal that form of oppression.<sup>50</sup> Nothing should simply be taken for granted in liberation theology, and Black theologians need to acknowledge this from the perspective of other oppressed groups. Summed up, one must constantly be redefining their theological perspective so as not to fall into the same trap as traditional Christianity has.

To avoid the complication of accidental reinforcement of oppression, many theologians have indeed modified their message to be more compatible with their teachings of liberation. For example, James Cone has made a conscious effort not to marginalize other minority groups through his works by tending to shy away from using male centric notion of God through descriptions.<sup>51</sup> This sort of criticism from other representative liberation theologies are beneficial in critiquing a still emerging form of thought, making it more compatible and accessible to other groups and individuals. Of course, while there are other oppressed minorities, Black liberation theologians maintain that the best way to view the struggle of the oppressed is through the portrayal of the Black Christ. Thus, as mentioned previously, those who follow Black liberation theology and constantly seek to reaffirm its message of rejecting oppressive traditional theology (such as the white Jesus of capitalism and privilege) by becoming Black with a capital B, while those who give into traditional theology (whether or not white in race or ethnicity) become White, as they are unable to affirm the struggles of those who are still subjugated. Nevertheless, with constant evaluation coming from all sides of the discussion within liberation theology, many times it is difficult for Black liberation theologians to acknowledge and adapt to the constantly changing landscape of religious debate within the community. They can easily be described as "failing to appreciate complex African American experience" (which does not exclude the experience of being a woman, gay, or any other perspective), while at the same time being charged with watering down the image of Christ to the point of obfuscation.<sup>52</sup> As a result, the image of Jesus with the tradition of Black liberation theology is still being tweaked by theologians seeking to find the most complete and meaningful image of the Son of God for its particular community.

Despite the seemingly endless analysis by in-groups of Black liberation theology, criticisms of the Black Christ do not end there. From the perspective of other traditional theologians, not surprisingly, there much offense taken to the attack on their religious perspective and contemplations about what a complete overhaul of the Christian faith would mean to all of its adherents. As referred to earlier, Jeffery Siker by far offers the most comprehensive view from the mainstream perspective. He questions the fundamental goals of Black liberation theology and what having a Black Christ for all

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<sup>49</sup> Williams, Delores S. Sisters in the Wilderness the Challenge of Womanist God-Talk. New York: Orbis Books, 1995. 1-2.

<sup>50</sup> Terrell, 110.

<sup>51</sup> In his reprint of A Black Theology of Liberation, Cone omitted the use of referring to God as a He, preferring a more neutral or even feminine tone for God and Christ.

<sup>52</sup> Battle, 165.



would entail from a self recognized "privileged" position. Primarily, one of his concerns is that, with the enhanced focus on Blackness (regardless of how widely the definition of Black is expanded to include), there becomes an unhealthy, overarching obsession with race. In creating a Black Jesus, "black theology effectively renders whiteness identifiable with what is of ultimate concern," meaning that the demonization of Whiteness and the desire of Black liberation theology to tear down everything that Whiteness entails could divert enough attention from the cause of liberation to cause it to fail.<sup>53</sup> Yet this leads into a second point of contention within the mainstream community. With a focus on ridding the world of a tyrannical White Jesus and replacing it with a Black one, there is a danger in simply exchanging one devil for another, as it were. Since the creation of Black liberation theology, Black theologians have toyed with the idea of making this form of Christianity the established way to view questions regarding various questions of the human condition.<sup>54</sup> Siker finds alarm with this "essentialist talk", and despite the benevolent mission of Black liberation theology, we return to the notion that power can corrupt, which can lead to the fear of manipulation of this form of Christianity.<sup>55</sup> This, of course, does not make the idea of Black liberation theology irrelevant in its mission. Critics often realize that there is a dilemma with long held notions of what it means to be a Christian, yet their response tends to be one more focused on an individualistic interpretation of Jesus and the Word of God. This is a problem that the Black Church often realizes, and to understand how they deal with this, it will help to explain the place of Christ in regards to the rest of the Christian message.

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<sup>53</sup> Siker, 22.

<sup>54</sup> Davis, 57.

<sup>55</sup> Siker, 48.

#### Part IV – Black Jesus in Action

The theory of the Black Christ is a highly debated and constantly deliberated topic within contemporary theologies, yet however powerful words and concepts are, the true merits of these ideas can best be judged on how they are practiced by its adherents. This assessment by the everyday individuals who are theoretically affected by the conditions laid down by Black liberation theology can be seen on two different levels. The first deals with how the Black Church at large has viewed the creation of the Black Christ, and the level of importance this figure has in the Black community. This analysis deals primarily with the internal practices of the Black Church, and attempts to put this construction of Jesus to work in its teachings. This includes discussion of the images of a black Christ replacing the white, as well as the social and spiritual message they attempt to portray. The second level deals with a more external perspective of the relationship between the Black Christ, the Black Church, and everyday individuals who do not engage in theological discourse for a living. From this perspective, it is possible to see how the Black Christ is being lived out through the Black community.

Before going any further, it is necessary to articulate the unique features of Black culture in contemporary society. As discussed in Part I, Africans often understood the human condition as communal, and this interpretation carried over from Africa to America, continuing to shape the way African Americans lived their daily lives.<sup>56</sup> As a result, Christian tradition for African Americans is often thought of as a “we” rather than an “I”. This effect creates a “Black spirituality [that] is Communitarian – as opposed to the Western outlook, which is individualistic.”<sup>57</sup> The problem that many Black Christians see in religion today is that there is an individualistic approach to living; each person worries about their own problems, and thus, it becomes all about “me”. What traditional Western Christianity fails to recognize is the interconnection of society at large. Often times, religious difficulties may seem to concern one particular group, and the focus is directed at patching that one divide, rather than observing the issue as most likely a symptom to the larger problem.<sup>58</sup> In Western culture, Jesus has been constructed as an individualistic savior, and often times it is difficult to reconcile that idea with problems that afflict an entire society, particularly that there is domination of a traditionally White society on Blacks at large.

One of the most prolific images seared into identities of the Black Church is the comparison between the lynchings of the Civil Rights movement and its close parallel with the crucifixion of Jesus. The Black Church was able to quickly grasp hold of this idea and create an image in which most African Americans could relate to, thus creating a connection between the fear of racial violence in the 1970s and 1980s with the death of Christ.<sup>59</sup> But not only was this image personalized, it created a feeling that could be shared with the community, thus enforcing the firmly held principle of religious unity. For the most part, the Black Church used this correlation to mobilize Christians to protest with a firm Christian (yet at the same time Black) message.<sup>60</sup> This was important because now the Black Church had a legitimate construction of Christ that could be actively used

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<sup>56</sup> Battle, 1.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>58</sup> Moore, 106.

<sup>59</sup> Whitted, 389

<sup>60</sup> Billingsley, 170.

to change the condition of African Americans throughout the country. Interestingly enough, research shows that “the tendency to protest to improve the status of the [Black community] appears dependent on the concurrent perception of a black Christ.”<sup>61</sup> While it is uncertain as to the exact reason for this, it would appear that simply being able to see and think of Jesus in terms of one’s own identity creates a stronger desire to refuse the status placed upon Blacks by White society. However, this idea of emphasizing Blackness is not a static feature in translating personal connectivity with Christian tenants to action for the good of the Black community. There is a general trend from methods of protest against racism towards community outreach programs.<sup>62</sup> The Black Christ retains the significance of its identification, but with a practical realization that a complete overhaul of the White power system in a revolutionary fashion is unlikely, there is a more immediate concern that seeks to improve the conditions of the Black community at a more local level.

Yet even though the conception of a black Jesus plays a role in solidifying a message of liberation against the traditional White power structure, the Black Church seems to place an oddly small amount of energy on the traditional conception of Christ. What this means is that the idea of Jesus as a personal savior is for the most part abandoned (as discussed earlier) and a new kind of figure is assembled. As seen in Stephen Prothero’s chapter on the “Black Moses”, often times Jesus is portrayed in comparison with other events or figures in the Bible that represents messages of liberation. In this case study, there is a correlation of Jesus as being Moses-like in leading people out of the wilderness and from oppression, and Jesus’ actions often represent a feature of the Exodus story.<sup>63</sup> This example is certainly not representative for the Black Church in general, but it does provide an adequate example for how Christ is constructed on a tangible level. Jesus is built up primarily as a facilitator of God’s will, in that God works “through Jesus” rather than having Jesus act in accordance with his own spiritual autonomy.<sup>64</sup> This seems to correlate with the message of fighting against the individualistic nature of Western culture, depleting further the meaning of “I” by indicating that it is ultimately up to God to decide how to go about aiding humankind; individuals like Jesus are merely tools (important tools, but tools nonetheless). In this tradition, God wanted those who were oppressed to be free, and creating figures like Christ would serve the larger purpose of the liberation message.

Looking at a black Jesus in terms of the Black community as a whole, it is apparent that their understanding of Christ is very similar in comparison to Black liberation theology. While more and more Blacks are able to identify with a Black Christ, their use for him is more personal and spiritual than traditional White Christianity.<sup>65</sup> Interestingly enough, looking towards Jesus often has a much more profound effect on the way Black Americans live their lives. “Spiritual development is seen as a lifeline, most importantly to eternal life through belief in Jesus Christ, but also as a healthy way

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<sup>61</sup> Reese, Laura, Ronald Brown, and James Ivers. "Some Children See Him...: Political Participation and the Black Christ." *Political Behavior* 29.4 (Dec. 2007): 532.

<sup>62</sup> This trend is significant because it shows that Black Churches more in line with the message of Black liberation theology tend to be more active in community outreach than traditionally White Churches. Billingsley, 97.

<sup>63</sup> Prothero, 204.

<sup>64</sup> Battle, 132, 139, 175.

<sup>65</sup> Reese, 532-533.

of coping with the trials of everyday life," such as racism and other forms of discrimination.<sup>66</sup> Their use for Black Jesus is personal in a manner not particularly relatable to the use of Christ in White churches. Rather, instead of continuous reference to the saving power of Christ as an indication of spirituality, the focus on both God and Old Testament passages provide a stronger influence for Black Christians.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, Blacks are generally more public with their religious beliefs, sharing their faith with others in their community.<sup>68</sup> This contributes to the idea of living a shared experience of oppression and using religion both to overcome the obstacles of everyday life individually and trying to tackle the overarching causes of these problems as a society.

One of the methods to illustrate how the meaning of the Black Christ manifests itself in everyday life is to view Black participation in mainstream society based off their conception of Jesus and Christianity. As mentioned above, Black churches tend to have a tight relationship to spirituality and applicability to everyday struggles, and religion is not seen as separate to choices made both in the private and public sphere. As a result, political participation and community activism can be seen as important institutions necessary to achieve spiritual goals (or at the very least, the actions they take are religiously informed). In regards to political participation and social organization, there is a strong correlation between envisioning the Black Jesus and various forms of activism. A recent survey of this relationship comes to several interesting conclusions:

"Believing that Christ is black appears to shift African Americans from relatively conservative or traditional forms of political participation, such as contacting, to more non-traditional political protest. That imagining a black Christ appears to be a radicalizing force can also be seen in the relationship between racial belief systems and political participation."<sup>69</sup>

Blacks who believe in a Jesus in their image seem to act as a catalyst for a rejection of the mainstream, traditionally White, system of organization for society. This radical denial rejects the notion that change must come slowly and over time, preferring the path of revolution as needed in order for Blacks to maintain at least a fraction of their autonomy from a White-centric society.

Furthermore, Jesus, while an important figure in informing political and social participation in nontraditional ways, is not seen as a necessary intermediary to communicating with God. Reflecting the remnants left from the African traditions, there is still that "tight cosmology" in which one is literally able to interact with God on a direct, material level. Blacks see themselves as having an intimate connection with God, in the sense that God is their closest friend.<sup>70</sup> Jesus is an important figure as an instrument of God's will, and salvation can still be attained through him, however, there is a need for the decrease of these traits in Black liberation theology and the Black community that recognizes it. Christ as a personal savior is a traditional conception that Blacks tend to

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<sup>66</sup> Haight, Wendy. *African-American Children at Church: A Sociocultural Perspective*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2001. 78.

<sup>67</sup> This study was conducted by cross-referencing national data sets in checking for consistency with findings. Taylor, Robert Joseph, Linda Marie Chatters, and Jeff Levin. *Religion in the Lives of African Americans Social, Psychological, and Health Perspectives*. Minneapolis: Sage Publications, Inc, 2004. 36, 50-59.

<sup>68</sup> Taylor, 7.

<sup>69</sup> Reese, 533.

<sup>70</sup> Taylor 72, 79.

shy away from, instead preferring to move towards a communal existence as expressed by Jesus and at the same time keeping a personal connection with God through an individual communication.<sup>71</sup> Overall, the image of Jesus has been reconstructed into a manner that acknowledges the conditions of Blacks in society, while subsequently rejecting many of the premises set forth by traditional theology.

Of course, despite the gains the Black Church has made in facilitating a more individualized Christianity, there still is much more work to accomplish. At the same time that Black liberation theology facilitates the liberation of Blacks, it can fall into the habit of reinforcing other oppressive structures in society. As discussed earlier, Womanist theologians take issue with the strengthening of a male dominated society, which Black Churches can be seen buying into.<sup>72</sup> These problems indicate how difficult it is for Black Churches to provide a message that can hopefully be expanded beyond the immediate surroundings of the oppressed Black community and become a more pervasive force throughout the American religious landscape. It is this aspect that will ultimately decide the future for Black liberation theology and the Black Christ.

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<sup>71</sup> Reese, 533.

<sup>72</sup> Hopkins. Heart and Head: Black Theology Past, Present, and Future. 185.

## Part V – Future of Black Liberation Theology and the Black Christ

As articulated already, in theory (and even in practice), the goals for Black liberation theology and the Black Christ provide a compelling case for adaptation into mainstream culture. And it would seem that in the emerging era of technology and communication, the message of Black liberation theology would be easily transferred into the public sphere for the everyday citizen to adapt into their own personal needs. While the image of the Black Christ might effectively combat the common sense image of a white Jesus far down the road, at this period in time, there is no indication that is the direction it is heading. Black liberation theology and its construction of Jesus is a relatively new, small, and still growing movement in comparison with many other denominations in America today, and its message against a White power structure is not (as would be expected) embraced by those who buy into this longstanding system. Critics abound from all sides, seeing the message of Black liberation theology as potentially dangerous not only to a majority of Americans who naturally benefit from rights derived from a White power structure, but to Blacks who seek to make progress through slow but steady negotiation (as opposed to a revolutionary mentality). But perhaps the most intriguing question is whether or not the Black Christ can actually heal the racial divide that has existed since the foundation of our country, or if in fact, it will simply fade away into the annals of history as just a theology contained to a particular group of people for a particular period of time. Yet before reaching that discussion, it would be advantageous to see Black liberation theology in the context of mainstream America, and why it is at the place where it is now.

Having only been truly articulated and refined over the course of the last 40 years, Black liberation theology has sought to make its Christ the most accurate and legitimate conception as seen through a Christian lens. Yet going against a power structure that has dominated the American religious landscape for nearly ten times as long as Black liberation theology has existed, proves to be a formidable obstacle. A study conducted within the past several years shows that only one third of Black urban clergy have been influenced by Black liberation theology, an indication that “the formulators of Black liberation theology have not been able to move beyond their middle-class origins, even though Black liberationists have sought to do theology from the ‘bottom up.’”<sup>73</sup> This is an indication of the perception of such a radically altered viewpoint that is quite unsettling to a majority of Americans. Even the very image of the Black Christ represents an attack upon the idea of Western capitalism and every individual working to get ahead for themselves. The Black Christ and the message of Black liberation theology bleed into other aspects of life, which perhaps is what concerns people more than the actual message and image of a black Jesus. As should not be surprising, “not all black churches are preaching and practicing the Christian gospel of returning all of society’s wealth to the poor.”<sup>74</sup> Particularly in an age when many black Americans are beginning to gain more influence and wealth (be it by playing by the rules of White culture or not) there is a hesitation to change the conversation about inequality to something as radical as Black liberation theology.

Additionally, there is a stigmatism about both the Black Christ and Black liberation theology by the media and by other elites. “Because the Black Church... is

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<sup>73</sup> Battle, 100-101.

<sup>74</sup> Hopkins. *Heart and Head: Black Theology Past, Present, and Future*. 171.

viewed primarily as a product of lower-income black culture, it is depicted in a largely negative manner” by mainstream society.<sup>75</sup> This is a quotation that deserves some unpacking. On the one hand, there is the claim made by liberation theologians that there is an effort to maintain the status quo in society.<sup>76</sup> Setting aside the issue of whether this is a conscious decision or not, there is the legitimate assumption that when individuals attain power, they will be very reluctant to give it up. Complimented with the unfamiliarity of the circumstance of which Black liberation theology arose and the message it teaches, there is a clear pushback by those who have the microphone, so to speak, to argue that the way things are going are fine and should not be changed. Nowhere can this be more clearly seen than in the uproar caused by remarks made by Reverend Jeremiah Wright during the 2008 presidential campaign.<sup>77</sup> Despite the fact that the statements taken from his sermons constituted less than .000001 percent of all the messages he had ever given as a minister, the mainstream media and others in the public eye were quick to take those comments out of context and turn the debate into an issue about the dangers of Black liberation theology.<sup>78</sup> Rather than explain why Wright had said the things he did (and from the context in which they arose), the media almost instantly categorized his remarks as those of a fringe black separatist, for the most part failing to realize the more complex message of Black liberation theology. And since, for many Americans, this was the first impression of Black liberation theology given to the public at large, theologians like Wright have become pariahs among the media and other elites whenever the message of liberation is expressed in this “radical” form. This sort of perception given by the media is concurrent to the popular understanding throughout middle and upper class Americans, and at the moment, there is very little effort to unravel the intricacies of the Black Christ and the problems of oppression.

While it is extraordinarily easy to dismiss Black liberation theology as lunacy and the image of the Black Christ as a militant symbol, concerns from more academic individuals in White society do arise as well. As mentioned previously, academic Jeffery Siker articulates a critique of Black liberation theology while acknowledging his limited perspective as part of White culture. While he would be in favor of accepting the image of the Black Christ as legitimate to the Christian message, he stops short of saying that it should be the only one considered as true:

“Not only are [Blacks] like Jesus, Jesus is like them. Each group has a self-interest, and understandably so, of not only imaging Jesus, and hence the divine, in terms of discipleship, but of imaging Jesus, and again hence the divine, after their own image and in their own likeness. Humans may have been created in the image of God, but ever since

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<sup>75</sup> Taylor, 19.

<sup>76</sup> Davis, 56.

<sup>77</sup> In March of 2008, ABC news made public excerpts of Rev. Wright’s sermons in which he condemned America by stating that the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 were God’s judgment for the evils of the country’s leadership. The significance of these remarks came after the acknowledgment that Rev. Wright had been then-candidate Barack Obama’s pastor for some time. Obama was forced to denounce his pastor in light of those remarks, and increased pressure from the mainstream media continued to reveal other incendiary comments made by Wright throughout his long tenure at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago.

<sup>78</sup> Moyer, David. "The rest of the story: ministry at Trinity UCC." *Christian Century* 125.8 (22 Apr. 2008): 10-11. 10-11.

then God has been created and recreated in the diverse images of humans, with Jesus as the focus of these incarnations within Christian tradition.”<sup>79</sup>

There is skepticism about the ultimate purpose of Black liberation theology, and what it would mean for other Christian denominations if it were to take the place as a leader in the religious realm. It is very easy for individuals to take the Bible and pick out parts that suit its own needs, thus creating a very limited canon within a canon. And Black liberation theology argues that, much like many other denominations, their way of articulating true Christianity is correct, and those that do not support a message of liberation are incorrect at best and heretical at worst. Of course, these are issues that Black liberation theology struggles to deal with, in addition to constantly reinforcing the idea of progression from unfounded, “common sense” assumptions. As George Cummings puts it, “the challenge therefore, for [Black liberation theology] in this regard, is to evolve a critique of values, structures, symbols, and practices that shape the black church” in a manner that avoids the difficult claim that many other religious perspectives make about their own superiority.<sup>80</sup> These constant readjustments help this young theology to find a more precise voice in hopes that eventually their message will prevail in the face of traditional theologies that work against the interests of the most oppressed of society.

For those individuals who do engage with and practice Black liberation theology, how they do so in everyday life speaks to the effectiveness and practicality of this theology. As Black liberation theologian Deotis Roberts remarks, “all movements for social change require thought related to action,” and thus Black liberation theology must provide tangible results constant with their message to be considered valuable.<sup>81</sup> Luckily for this theology, studies show that there is a positive correlation between thought and action of its practitioners. Generally speaking, the Black Church is viewed as having “a beneficial impact on the lives of black Americans” through encouraging a more communal experience that fosters a sense of accountability towards one another.<sup>82</sup> Black Americans are able to use this sentiment to improve their conditions in particular communities, creating a productive form of resistance that is slowly gaining ground. Generally speaking, individuals who actively live the message of Black liberation theology both encourage and are “willing to lead by serving others and [reject] any personal benefit derived from that leadership.”<sup>83</sup> Considering the goals of Black liberation theology, these results show promise in helping those in society who suffer from the oppressive structure of White society. But at the same time, acknowledgement must be given to the fact that those who are not directly affected by this problem are largely ignorant of the meaning of images like that of the Black Christ. In this sense, Black liberation theology is successful in using the Black Christ and other themes of liberation to achieve its goal within the community, but meets an impasse when dealing with those not familiar with the use of this liberation language.

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<sup>79</sup> Siker, 27.

<sup>80</sup> Cummings, George C. L. Common journey Black theology (USA) and Latin American liberation theology. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1993. 143.

<sup>81</sup> Roberts, J. Deotis. Black theology today liberation and contextualization. New York: E. Mellen P, 1983. 195, 215.

<sup>82</sup> Taylor, 21.

<sup>83</sup> Hopkins. Heart and Head: Black Theology Past, Present, and Future. 181.



Despite the fact that Black liberation theology is still a small movement with little opportunity to voice its concerns, there is a growing trend for this theology to transcend Christianity and dialogue with other religious and non religious groups who have a similar aim. When it comes down to it, the idea that God is on the side of the oppressed makes it necessary to help all those who are oppressed, not simply other Black Christians who follow its message. It becomes difficult to claim that God is only where Jesus is, because that makes the liberation message too restrictive and harmful to those who disagree.<sup>84</sup> There is a significant connection between the importance of the Black Christ in Black liberation theology and the way Black liberation theology goes about communicating with other groups. As discussed earlier, Christ takes a seat next to the other stories of the Bible that express liberation (e.g. the Exodus from Egypt), and in doing so, there is a recognition that while Black Christians can see the importance of having a Black Christ, God can still utilize other methods that encourage the rejection of oppressive societies. The Black Church advocates "eventual inclusion of all God's children" by inviting them to partake in the spiritual community, thus creating a more open and all-encompassing doctrine of Black liberation theology.<sup>85</sup> Among the Black community, this would certainly be beneficial for improving the conditions of many individuals who still suffer forms of discreet and outright subjugation by returning to a sense of unity that provides hope that their oppression is only temporary if they are willing to reject it through both traditional and nontraditional means.

Of course, while the Black Christ may be beneficial for African Americans across the varying religious and secular spectrum, the question remains as to the goal of ultimate racial reconciliation between black and white. Present-day culture often sees this as a loaded question in itself. To address this issue gives legitimacy to the premise that there is still a racial problem in America. Black liberation theology affirms the assumption of social oppression by arguing that it is often those who are in the positions of privilege who either are unable to see a problem with race, or scapegoat this theology for creating a racial problem where there was none to begin with. Yet for most theologians who have spent extended periods of time engaging with the tenants of Black liberation theology, whether they agree with what it has to say or not, there is a general acknowledgement that a racial problem still does exist.<sup>86</sup> But is the Black Christ truly able to overcome the seemingly impossible task of race relations in the American socio-political arena?

The first reaction by many critics of the Black Christ is to answer in the negative. The very idea that the race of Jesus is important would certainly appear to be a catalyst for contention. Siker states that making the debate about race, or even a dichotomy between oppressed versus privilege cannot end well:

"The problem is that there is no subversion of race in religion. It becomes the dominant group versus the minority, creating a divide in which Cone argues that there is no room for negotiation. The problem can never be solved in this case."<sup>87</sup>

The very idea of one group attempting to unseat another does indeed resound with the uncomfortable air of militantism. And in a society that has grown accustomed to relatively peaceful transitions of power in the wake of the volatile Civil Rights

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* 113.

<sup>85</sup> Battle, 99.

<sup>86</sup> Hopkins. Heart and Head: Black Theology Past, Present, and Future. 112.

<sup>87</sup> Siker, 50.

movement, there is a fear that the Black Christ is still stuck in an age that demands violent revolutions as necessary to bring about equality. For a majority of Americans, this seems like an inconsistent and even an unnecessary method to achieve one's goals. With an increasing number of out groups in the public square, disrupting the progressing system would seem like a detriment to the process as a whole. And indicative of the reception by mainstream America, this is a problem that has yet to be resolved.

But despite the resistance by many Americans to diverge from the path of gradual progress and equality, Black liberation theologians fear that this progress will not go far enough. Even now, many in the mainstream public argue that enough equality has been given to these out groups (or even too much power has been given), and Americans should no longer be as concerned with issues such as equality or disparities between race, gender, or sexuality.<sup>88</sup> Overall, there is a desire to simply sweep these concerns under the rug in hopes that they resolve themselves or simply disappear. The fact remains that there is still a disproportionate number of poor blacks living in the ghettos of American cities, and a lack of both education and employment opportunities for even those who do wish to remove themselves from their circumstances. For them, progress cannot come fast enough. The image of the Black Christ and the message of Black liberation theology argue that they should not have to wait for justice. While a solution to this problem is most likely impossible in the current political and social arena, racial reconciliation must be addressed in a straightforward and upfront conversation in order to get at the problems truly plaguing both Christianity and American society.

Black liberation theology achieves two important goals; it encourages Americans to have a dialogue about the issue of race from a perspective outside of their own common sense understanding, and it highlights the necessity to constantly reevaluate one's faith in order to create a more genuine and unadulterated conversation in mainstream society. Quite simply, the uniqueness and peculiarity of the image of the Black Christ reminds us that many of our inherent understandings about the nature of both our religious perspectives and society are often formed by conceptions passed down from generation to generation without much thoughtful analysis as to why we assume what we do. It should be acknowledged that as finite beings, we do not have all the answers, and that while the claims made by Black liberation theology and its proponents may be wildly outside the parameter of our normal conversations, it should not be dismissed simply because of that. We all have our particular world view, and many times certain aspects of that understanding are difficult to change or alter. Yet the only way for progress to be made is if we are willing to challenge assumptions and continue to question and reevaluate what we previously took for granted, and that is what the Black Christ symbolizes. Our particular views inform how we live, and in the light of liberation theology, we can begin to see that the struggle is not simply confined to black and white, but enters in to every aspect of our culture. Black liberation theology argues that we must create a spirituality that best defines how we should live as moral and decent human beings, rather than be engulfed in an unfair system that privileges others without any reason other than tradition. When we reach that point, we will have arrived at a faith that helps inform how we live regardless of where we end up in society. Just as it is important never to forget those who suffer from oppression, it is just as important to remember the true nature of our faith, and be willing to live by that both in the good times and the bad.

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<sup>88</sup> Battle, 165.

In the words of Jeremiah Wright, "Thank God! Thank God! Don't let go of you faith. I don't care how high up you go. Don't let go of your faith."<sup>89</sup> And if there is one thing that everyone can take from the image of the Black Christ, it is that only when we take the time to stop and listen to others can we acknowledge and understand those who share a completely different existence from our own. And once we are able to appreciate the complexity of these divergent views, the real conversation can finally begin.

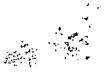
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<sup>89</sup> Wright, 250.

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The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It emphasizes that every entry should be supported by a valid receipt or invoice. This ensures transparency and allows for easy verification of the data.

In the second section, the author outlines the various methods used to collect and analyze the data. This includes both primary and secondary data collection techniques. The primary data was gathered through direct observation and interviews, while secondary data was obtained from existing reports and databases.

The third section details the statistical analysis performed on the collected data. It describes the use of descriptive statistics to summarize the data and inferential statistics to test hypotheses. The results of these analyses are presented in a clear and concise manner, highlighting the key findings of the study.

Finally, the document concludes with a summary of the findings and their implications. It discusses the limitations of the study and suggests areas for future research. The author expresses confidence in the reliability of the data and the validity of the conclusions drawn.