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A Historical Analysis of Howard Thurman's Theology of Brotherly Love

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A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF HOWARD THURMAN'S

THEOLOGY OF BROTHERLY LOVE

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY
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BY

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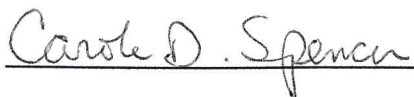
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Date: **December 16, 2005**

We, the undersigned, certify that we have read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree of Master of Arts in Theological Studies.



(R. Larry Shelton)



(Carole D. Spencer)

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ABSTRACT

Is it possible to have an adverse experience with Christianity and emerge being empowered by a new understanding of the gospel? Howard Thurman seems to answer that question in the affirmative. Thurman analyzes comments from Mahatma Gandhi and a barrister from “India” about Christianity under the light of the gospel. This encounter was important. It was the Genesis of Thurman’s theology of brotherly love.

This paper is an historical analysis of Howard Thurman’s struggle to resolve the conflict between the perception that Christianity is a white man’s religion and the gospel of Jesus and the disinherited.

The writer will discuss Thurman’s belief in Christian community and the true Christian message. Additionally, this research examines how Thurman combined his recognition of Jesus being the subject of religious worship, with his view that mysticism was an agent that leads to social change.

Finally, we will explore Thurman’s emerging theology of brotherly love. We will see that the linchpin behind Thurman’s theology is Jesus, the potent and affirming Messiah. Jesus and his examples of how to love the disinherited demonstrate that the love of Christ is the element that will bring about healing, wholeness and unity to Christians and to the world.

INTRODUCTION

There is a clear division in the community of the faithful concerning the uses of temporal power and privilege among Christians. This is a divide along the lines of power and privilege which has spawned deep hostility between people of color and white people.

Is it possible to have an adverse experience with Christianity and emerge being empowered by a new understanding of the gospel? Howard Thurman seems to answer that question in the affirmative. In his book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman analyzes comments from Mahatma Gandhi and a barrister from “India” about Christianity under the light of the gospel.¹ He finds that Jesus is a potent and yet affirming Messiah.² Others, however, such as Thiong’o Ngugi, a prominent writer from Kenya, disagree with Thurman’s supposition. Ngugi postulates that the reason for the lack of brotherly love is that white people have not shown themselves to be brotherly as it relates to their treatment of people of color. He maintains that people of color have had more than an adverse experience, and suggests that Europeans have imposed their culture, language and values on people of color for many years. Ngugi seems to have a valid argument, given the history of the colonization of people of color throughout the world between the early eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

¹ Walter E. Fluker and Catherine Tumber, *Strange Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 200-210.

² Howard Thurman, *Jesus and The Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1944), 89.

This paper will not seek to answer the many questions about race and racism which seem to have afflicted our world for several centuries. Nor will it address solutions or remedies for reciprocity for people of color who have suffered loss at the hands of some white people. This paper is an historical analysis of Howard Thurman's struggle to resolve the conflict between the perception that Christianity is a white man's religion and the gospel of Jesus and the disinherited.

For many years, the absence of social equality and the lack of brotherly love have been major problems among Christians. On one hand, some privileged white people have concluded that God has granted them exclusive, providential rights; they have taken the words "subdue the earth" quite literally. In particular, those of privilege, in North America especially, have maintained that people of color were predestined by God to live their lives in oppression, obedience and servitude to them (the privileged-masters) "as unto the Lord." For example, in 1702, John Saffin circulated a pro-slavery pamphlet in rebuttal of earlier anti-slavery literature that had been published by Superior Court Judge Samuel Sewell. In his pamphlet, Saffin argued that the pro-slavery theory rested squarely on two biblical pillars. First, he cited, "the divine dispensation to Israel to possess slaves"³ according to Lev. 24:44-46NASB. The second pillar he grounded his position of pro-oppression on was I Cor. 12:13-26 NASB. There he contended that, "St Paul set forth his philosophy of grades and orders."⁴ Later in the same pamphlet, Saffin makes use of

³ William Sumner Jenkins, *Pro-Slavery Thought In the Old South*: (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1960), 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

the argument from Old Testament prophecy, the curse of Canaan. There he argues that the Negro is depraved and therefore, rightly to be enslaved.⁵

On the other hand, people of color in North America have understood their plight to be the result of social affliction. As they see it, the white man has treated them with contempt, and often inhumanely. For example, Martin Luther King Jr. recalled being in a diner in Atlanta Georgia, where he and several others on the same flight were deplaned because of bad weather. Dr. King had fast made friends with a white man seated next to him. However, once all of the passengers from that flight had reached the diner, King was separated from the others, including his seat mate, because Jim Crow laws were in effect. King was made to sit in the service room located behind the kitchen. Of course, he was also the last one to place his order. When the waitress finally came, he asked to see the manager. He expressed to the white manager how inhuman he was being made to feel, as a result of being isolated from the rest of the paying customers. Even worse for King, was that the tiny service room he ate in was cold and damp. In his estimation, these conditions were not even fit for an animal, let alone a paying customer, yet the manager suggested that King had another option, and that was to leave.⁶ In this light, at the heart of the problem may be the complete lack of brotherly love and social justice on the part of some privileged whites. Their failure is in obeying the clear admonition of the gospel, which says to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all of your soul, and with all of your mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself. Matt 12:31.

⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶ Clayborne Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 63-82.

The question of whether Christianity is a white man's religion has been debated for centuries. The real question, however, is whether imperialism has been disguised in Christian clothes and then passed off as authentic Christianity. If this is the case, then many people of color have never truly been introduced to the potent messiah that Howard Thurman wrote about in *Jesus and the Disinherited*.

This research has four hypotheses. First, white imperialism is the primary reason for the perception that Christianity is a white man's religion. In other words, some white people have used imperialism to advance themselves economically, socially and politically in the name of Christianity, and at the expense of people of color. It is this that lies at the root of this contentious issue.

Secondly, the writer will discuss Thurman's belief in Christian community and the true Christian message. We will discover, as did Thurman that an ugly dialectic may be what separates how both people of color and white people have tended to view the gospel message.

Thirdly, the research will examine Howard Thurman's new insights about Christianity. This breakthrough for Thurman came as a result of recognizing that Jesus must be the subject and not the object of religious worship. Furthermore, Thurman combines this view with mysticism as an agent for social change.

Finally, we will explore Thurman's emerging theology of brotherly love. We will see his conclusion that the love of Christ is the element that will bring about healing, wholeness and unity to all Christians and to the world. As Thurman sees it, before love can be achieved, one must reckon with fear, deception and hatred. Only after dealing with these three elements, can one truly love.

CHAPTER I

Is Christianity a White Man's Religion, or Imperialism?

The perception that Christianity is a white man's religion is one that has existed among people of color in North America for at least two centuries. Moreover, the same perception has been verbalized by other people of color around the world. Howard Thurman encountered this perception while he was in India. In fact, he heard again and again, "But you see, Mr. Thurman, our conquerors are Europeans and are Christians."¹ Another example is the South Africans, such as Desmond Tutu, who suffered cruelly under the system of apartheid. Tutu points out that apartheid happened to over three million of his fellow South Africans, who were victims of social engineering by European Christian ideologies.²

In this paper, the term "people of color" will refer to any people or group that is not of European descent. Additionally, while this paper will consider people of color from various places in the world, those instances will serve to help demonstrate how broad and far-reaching the perception actually is that Christianity belongs to the white man. Furthermore, the primary concern of Howard Thurman, and therefore the concern of this writer, will be people of color (blacks) in North America.

¹ Howard Thurman, *A Strange Freedom : The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*, ed. Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 203.

² Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*: (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 15.

A perception is a judgment made by a person or a group of people based on what has been observed or discerned. Historical events and cruel practices that are no less than systemic have caused many people of color around the world to form the perception that Christianity belongs to the white man. Moreover, built into this perception may also be the notion that Christ himself is the champion of the powerful.

In this chapter, it is not my goal to prove or disprove the validity of the perception that Christianity is a white man's religion. Rather, the issue of validity associated with this perception is not my concern at this time. The task at hand is to seek out what lies behind this perception. The real question is whether Christianity has been used as a strategy by some Western European whites, including whites from North America, in order to gain a social, economic and political advantage for themselves.

To ask the question another way, has imperialism, i.e. Western colonization, been dressed up in Christian clothes and then represented as authentic Christianity? Imperialism is the policy, practice, or advocacy of extending the power and dominion of a nation by direct territorial acquisitions or by gaining indirect control over the political or economic life of others.³

Howard Thurman suspected that this was exactly what had been taking place in India and throughout the world for centuries. With his trip to India fresh on his mind, Thurman writes that:

The Missionary faces a very peculiar dilemma. He comes into the country as a product of Western civilization and such culture as he has been able to absorb. He propagates a faith which for him is personal and ultimate. It is a faith, however, built upon certain definite assumptions relative to the established order of which he is a part. If he is a Britisher it is a faith that is built upon the assumption of empire.

³ *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (1963).

If he is any other kind of European including the American, it is a faith that is built on the assumption of ultimate supremacy of his religion, his civilization and his race. The missionary cannot ever escape the damaging fact that the conqueror of the people to whom he is going is not only like him as to race, but is also a Christian.⁴

Thurman made many important observations about how Western imperialism had affected the lives of the people of color in India. Based on his encounter with Indian and Western Christianity, Thurman believed that Indians who converted from Hinduism had to make a complete break from their indigenous way of life.⁵ This meant that when an Indian began to make his new religion at home in his country, he found that all of his old cultural patterns were Hindu; furthermore, if his new religion were to become indigenous, then all of his familiar ways, according to his profession of faith, would be anathema.⁶ For Christian Indians, this always meant having to make room for their new Christian practices by abandoning everything Hindu. Clearly this is another example of Western imperialism. Additionally, while Thurman was in India, he observed that the Western imperialist version of Christianity was not only united by race, but also functioned through a hierarchical structure and offered little or no flexibility to Hindus seeking to find a home in Christianity.⁷ Dr. Thurman puts forth that:

Western Christianity came to India via the Portuguese who established their hierarchy throughout their sphere of influence. Under the mission of propaganda in the seventeenth century the papacy began its large and influential work in the

⁴ Ibid., 203.

⁵ Ibid., 202.

⁶ Ibid., 203.

⁷ Ibid., 203.

country. Protestant Christianity came to India about 1813. Protestants represent many things other than a united front. They are united in three important particulars: first they are all Western and white; second, they all claim loyalty to Christ; third, they all definitely or ostensibly endorse and cooperate with British rule. Because the vast majority of the Indian population is Hindu, they therefore embrace Hinduism as not only their religion, but their culture and civilization. Hinduism's genius is naturally synthesizing. As a result, when Christianity came to India, the attempt was made to project Christianity in the same way.⁸

Thurman's observations about Western imperialism are striking. Moreover, they underlie the true aims and interests of the Western colonizers, which were to make the world their empire. Cornel West points out that when the most powerful forces in an empire promote a suffocation of democratic energies and the very future of genuine democracy is jeopardized.⁹ West goes on to ask:

Can any empire resist the temptation to become intoxicated with the hubris and greed of imperial possibilities? Has not every major empire pursued quixotic dreams of global domination-of shaping the world into its image and for its interest-that resulted in internal decay and doom?¹⁰

There can be no doubt, based on the historical evidence, that the answer to Dr. West's questions must be a resounding "no." To be sure, the temptation to be intoxicated with the possibilities of imperial greed is too much for any dominant group to resist. Some would argue that the Western European imperialist mindset is responsible for the raping and pillaging of darker people, and consequently, this has enlarged their own territories. Thiong'o Ngugi concurs with this assessment and provides this example. Ngugi writes, "Imperialism is total: it has economic, political, military, cultural and

⁸ Ibid., 201-202.

⁹ Cornel West, *Democracy Matters* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), 8.

¹⁰ Ibid., 8.

psychological consequences for the people of the world today. It could even lead to a holocaust.”¹¹

For Ngugi, the reality of imperialism on the part of Western settlers is all too clear. In his homeland of South Africa, Mr. Ngugi suffered the harshness of Western colonization. He learned first-hand that, “The imperialist tradition in Africa is maintained by the international bourgeoisie using the multinational and of course the flag-waving native ruling classes.”¹²

Ngugi goes on to say:

The economic and political dependence of this African neo-colonial bourgeoisie is reflected in its culture of apemanship and parrotry enforced on a restive population through police boots, barbed wire, a gowned clergy and judiciary; their ideas are spread by a corpus of the state intellectuals, the academic and journalistic laureates of the neo-colonial establishment.¹³

It is unclear whether Mr. Ngugi is bitter about what he and other South Africans had to endure while being under the thumb of an imperialist regime. Nevertheless, what is very obvious through his writing is that he has a particular perception about Christianity. To Ngugi, Christians are white people who have come into his country with promises of making life better through Jesus. However, what they delivered was considerably different than what they promised. He explains that:

Colonialism involved two aspects of the same process: the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, their art, dances, religions, history geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the colonizer. The domination of a people's language by the

¹¹ Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising The Mind* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1986), 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized.¹⁴

The historical tragedy is that Western imperialism goes hand in hand with capitalism. These have been allowed to flourish and advance a selfish agenda under the guise of Christianity. Regardless of where this has occurred--India, Africa, Asia, South America or North America—the Western European has made the world his footstool. The real question here is what underlies this spirit of domination? William H. Swatos Jr. provides one possibility. He contends that, “predestination as a doctrine is no more than the mere fact of primitive accumulation which explains capitalism.”¹⁵ He also holds that Weber was the first to identify that, “Sectarian exclusivism and the emphasis upon individual vocation is predicated upon the predestination doctrine as the ideological substructure for the spirit of capitalism.”¹⁶ Swatos’ point is that Calvin’s doctrine of double predestination is not directly responsible for how the empowered class behaves and treats the weaker, but when predestination is combined with capitalistic ideology; it becomes the breeding ground for elitism, and the crushing of the poor. Elitism and crushing the poor is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, the prophet Amos and the elite of his time who lived in the North were involved in this very business. The people from Israel believed that they were the chosen and blessed by God. The result was that they capitalized on the labor of the poor, and oppressed them with the heaviness of poverty. In

¹⁴ Ibid., 16.

¹⁵ William H. Swatos Jr., *Mediating Capitalism And Slavery: A Neo-Weberian Interpretation Of Religion And Honor In The Old South*, Number 3 (Tampa: USF Monographs In Religion And Public Policy, 1987), 6-7.

¹⁶ Ibid., 7.

sum, God's judgment came upon Israel, Amos 4:1-2. In many ways the scourge of "Christian imperialism" has made Christ and the rest of the non-European world into its image. This sad reality is perhaps one of the chief reasons that people of color throughout the world have had a difficult time believing in a religious system that so thoroughly dominates the very people it is attempting to evangelize.¹⁷ Tony Brown says of British imperialism that, "The British love freedom almost as much as they love depriving people of it."¹⁸ Moreover Thurman observes that in India imperial Christianity, especially that of the British, has brought with it class distinctions. He postulates that, "Western Christianity in India has succeeded in bringing home to the Indian one impressive fact, that is, that the Westerner is infinitely superior and more worthful than the Indian."¹⁹ Walter Rauschenbusch has observed the same to be true of white imperialism in the United States directed towards blacks. In *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, he writes that:

I have seen Southern pamphlets undertaking to prove that the Negroes are not descended from Adam, but have evolved from African jungle beasts. The very orthodox authors were willing to accept the heretical philosophy of evolution for the black people, though of course they claimed biblical creation for the white. The purpose of this religious maneuver is to cut the bond of human obligation and solidarity established by religion, and put the Negroes outside the protection of the moral law.²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid., 204.

¹⁸ Tony Brown, *Empower The People* (New York: Quill, 1998), 52.

¹⁹ Ibid., 204.

²⁰ Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Abingdon, 1945), 185-186.

It has been said that things always seemed darkest before they get brighter. While I cannot substantiate the validity of that statement, it does seem to agree with what we have observed about the conditions and treatments that people of color have had to endure thus far. However, in order to observe why the conditions for people of color worsened all over the world but particularly in North America, we must look at what have historically been the primary motives and benefits of Western colonization to those of European descent.

Imperialism, Greed and Personal Gain

Howard Thurman saw the effects that greed and personal wealth had on Western Christianity. On one hand, it turned generally good white people into ruthless imperialists, who were capable of doing anything in order to make a profit. On the other hand, this same desire for personal wealth also turned people of color into the servants of the white upper class. Based upon these insights, Thurman recognized that white Christians held a decided advantage due to their positions of status and privilege. As a result of going to the scriptures, Thurman observed two groups, who for him, fit into the mold of those who enjoyed similar social and economic privilege. First, he observed the Sadducees. They represented the upper class or the aristocracy. They assimilated into the mainstream of secular society, thus allowing their differences between society and the true Christian way to be dissolved. Any disturbance of the established order would mean upsetting their position.²¹ They loved Israel, but they loved security even more. They

²¹ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1949), 24.

idealized the position of the Romans in the world and therefore suffered the fate of the Romans by becoming like them.²²

The second group that Dr. Thurman identified was the Pharisees. This group was always in opposition to those who worked for social change. They in fact were the guarantors of the status quo.²³ They were determined to hold on to “their” security at any cost. They felt safe only as long as they could use their power to give others a sense of insecurity.²⁴ In this way, security and insecurity continued in the hands of the Pharisees. They tolerated no active resistance against Rome. They were, in fact, the storekeepers of a racial/political powder keg waiting to go off. Thurman goes on to say that, “All imperialism functions this way. Subject people are held under control by this device.”²⁵

Furthermore, Thurman writes:

Jesus never intended that Christianity be a religion for the powerful and dominant, but it became a vehicle used for oppression; But where ever his Spirit appears, the oppressed gather for fresh courage. The good news announces that the "three hounds of Hell, fear, hypocrisy; hatred that track the trail of the disinherited need have no dominion over them. Oppressors make Christianity appear to be in desperate opposition to the oppressed. In fact, in this light, Christianity is a betrayal to the disinherited, by delivering them into the hands of the enemy by focusing on heaven, forgiveness, love, and the like. These must be put into proper context in order to show their strength and vitality rather than weakness and failure.²⁶

²² Ibid., 24.

²³ Ibid., 25.

²⁴ Ibid., 25.

²⁵ Ibid., 25.

²⁶ Ibid., 29.

Another poignant example of the effects that greed and personal wealth had on Western Christianity is found in Desmond Tutu's writing. Tutu tells of a particularly dubious holiday that had its genesis in a bloody battle wherein the Afrikaaners (white settlers) felt that God preferred them over the native South Africans people (those of color). Moreover, Tutu describes how Afrikaaners used the victory from this battle to continue to justify hoarding the country's resources, as well as their horrendous oppression of the indigenous people. Tutu posits that:

It had been a very jingoistic commemoration of the unlikely victory of a small group of Afrikaaner Voortekkers, those who had left the Cape in high dudgeon in the 1830's when they were incensed by British policies that appeared to want to treat the "natives" as somehow equal to whites. They undertook what came to be called the Great Trek, perceiving themselves as somehow reenacting the Exodus of God's chosen people from their bondage in Egypt. They were the new elect; God's chosen escaping from the bondage of British imperialism. In 1838 one of the Voortekker bands, faced with a battle against impi or regiments of Zulu army, had first prayed fervently to God to bless them in the coming unequal struggle, promising in a covenant that, should God grant them victory over these benighted native hoards, they and their posterity would forever observe that day as a solemn commemoration. They adopted their new strategy of forming a circle with their wagons as a kind of mobile fortress-the laager-from whose safety they would hope to repulse their foes. Nothing short of a miracle happened. God answered their prayers and they inflicted a resounding victory at the Battle of Blood River on December 16.²⁷

Tutu continues by saying of this spurious celebration that, "It was a chauvinistic and sectional commemoration celebrating in their view what had been so clearly demonstrated in this victory: their superiority over the black heathen natives."²⁸

Clearly, to the Afrikaaners, God had bestowed upon them favor that allowed them to enjoy special privileges due merely to their skin pigmentation.

²⁷ Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 70.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

The previously mentioned observation of Howard Thurman that the white aristocracy had allowed its differences between society and the true Christian way to be dissolved appears to find agreement with Jean and John Comaroff. Jean and John Comaroff point out that for Congregationalists, "Religious independency was associated with freedom from economic need or political patronage."²⁹ They go on to say that, "There appeared to be a growing opulence among urban congregations."³⁰ It seems that wherever the opportunity for economic and political prosperity avails itself, those living with an advantage can easily find themselves consumed by their greed for gain and more power. To this end, the Comaroffs write that:

The evangelists were not to escape the social and political tensions of the Colony. From very early on the African communities along the frontier became the object of struggle among white colonists with design on their land and labor, and the Dutch Reformed Church had long opposed mission work among the slaves at the Cape. Not unexpectedly, then, the Nonconformists entered this trouble arena as marked men and were soon drawn into the thick of the dispute. For they too were competitors in the battle to gain control over black populations.³¹

One cannot help but ask where this brand of Christianity was born, and whether or not there was any consciousness of sin present on the part of those who participated in violence for personal gain. The Comaroffs also help us here. They mention that the Congregationalist churches drew heavily from the Calvinist tradition. They posit that, "They were founded in a covenant relationship with God and one another, giving

²⁹ Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and revolution*, ed. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, 1 vols. (Chicago: Chicago Press, 1991).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

absolute obedience to none but the sovereign Spirit.”³² Because of the closeness of their connection to Calvinistic doctrine, and particularly the doctrine of election, it is easy to understand how these imperialists could view themselves as Christians, without feeling any culpability for their sin. It seems in their estimation, they were God’s elect. By this standard, they were well within their providential rights to what they perceived to be their mandate from scripture: “And God blessed them; and God said to them, be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” Gen. 1:28 NASB.

Certainly the doctrine on election does not exonerate a person or any particular group from their spiritual responsibility, or sin for that matter. Moreover, while Calvin did hold to the doctrine of election, he also maintained the Augustinian position of total depravity, based on original sin. This idea is that when man originally disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, man became a sinner. Furthermore, he passed his sin on to all of humankind, including the elect. In this vein, Maddox argues that, “In reformed theology it became common to describe it as total depravity.”³³ He says that, “The corruption of sin decisively affects every faculty of the human person, leaving us incapable of living in God’s likeness.”³⁴ Maddox further maintains that, “Humans, by nature, are wholly corrupt and incapable of any response to God apart from a new work of grace.”³⁵

³² Ibid., 44.

³³ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 89.

³⁴ Ibid., 90.

³⁵ Ibid., 92-93.

Wesley was in concert with St Augustine's doctrine of original sin. His agreement with this doctrine issued from Wesley's belief in the total depravity of man. That is to say, every person is totally corrupt and incapable of responding to God through any form of human initiative. Wesley however, did not agree with Augustine and Calvin's view of double predestination. This is a position holds that God has by His sovereignty predestined some to experience grace and others, namely the poor, damnation. In short, the view portrays God as the one responsible for establishing the class structure. This is not the case. Calvin's view of predestination has given some men an opportunity to exhibit their total depravity. Both Wesley and Thurman would see Calvin's view of predestination as a distortion of God's grace. Wesley and Thurman would agree that God's grace is free to all who will accept it. That is to say, while God invites everyone to participate in His grace, few people actually accept His offer. This is clear in Wesley's sermon "Free Grace" in which he maintains, "It is free only for those whom God hath ordained to life; and they are but a few."³⁶

Wesley continues by showing that the logical conclusion of the doctrine of total depravity would mean that:

The greater part of mankind God hath ordained to death; and it is not free to them. Them God hath; and, therefore, before they were born, decreed they should die eternally. Because it was his sovereign will. Accordingly, they are born for this, to be destroyed body and soul in hell.³⁷

Perhaps it is through total depravity that systematic evil finds it grounding. This could help to explain why institutional colonial networks whose bent was toward

³⁶ John Wesley, "*Original Sin*" 68.

³⁷ Ronald J. Sider, *Christ and Violence* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1979), 70.

capitalism, personal gain and greed thrived. Additionally, total depravity may also help to explain why these networks were allowed to legalize their political machinery under the guise of Christianity for so long. In *Christ and Violence* Ronald Sider stringently argues that:

Although both slavery and child labor were legal, they destroyed people by the millions. They represented institutionalized violence or structural evil. Tragically, most Christians seem to be more concerned with individual sinful acts than with participation in violent social structures. But the bible condemns both.³⁸

Sider correctly assesses the bible's condemnation of oppressive practices for the purpose of personal gain. Amos the Prophet speaks the word of the Lord, and contends that:

For three transgressions of Israel and for four, I will not revoke the punishment: because they sell the righteous for money, and the needy for a pair of sandals. These who pant after the very dust of the earth on the head of the helpless also turn side the way of the humble; And a man and his father resort to the same girl in order to profane My holy name. Amos 2:6-7 NASB.³⁹

Thurman would agree that there is nothing wrong with wealth itself. However, he found the methods many white people used to gain their wealth were shamefully reprehensible. In concert with Thurman's thinking, Walter Rauschenbusch posits that:

Capitalistic Europe has fastened its yoke on the neck of Africa. When negroes are hunted from a Northern city like beasts, or when a Southern city degrades the whole nation by turning the savage inhumanity of a mob into a public festivity, we are continuing to sin because our fathers created the condition of sin by the African

³⁸ Ibid., 70.

³⁹ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Hebrew--Greek Key Study Bible* (Chattanooga: AMG, 19990), 1197.

slave trade and by the unearned wealth they generated from slave labor for generations.⁴⁰

So far we have seen that the effects of capitalism, greed and the desire for personal gain worked in favor of European imperialists seeking to build white empires. Moreover, we have also seen that in order to accomplish this goal, to a great extent these imperialists including white Christian missionaries, conquered foreign lands and people of color through force and many bloody tactics, leading to their subjugation.

The Decimation of Culture

Territory and the ability to function as a sovereign government were not the only things wrested away from people of color, nor were they the only reasons for the perpetuating the belief that Christianity was a white man's religion. However, when the white missionaries from Western European countries imposed new ways of life and customs on people of color, several more reasons for this perception emerged.

Howard Thurman was convinced that because the European or British individual believed that he had been given a divine right to conquer, his mindset is bent toward absolute domination, and therefore, economic victory would not be enough. Thurman suggests that:

The Britisher is very sure of one thing and that is that he is a brilliant illustration of the favoritism of Divine Providence. All of his religion, ethics, and morality move out from the assumption of empire. Granted the prerogatives of empire, the Britisher is just a white man when he is dealing with lesser breeds without the law.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ibid., 79.

⁴¹ Ibid., 207.

The next frontier for white imperialists to conquer, as it relates to the utter domination of people of color, was that of their culture. Thurman argues that in India to become a Christian ultimately meant that Indians had to stop being Hindu. The real issue for an Indian is that his/her entire identity, as well as his/her connectedness to the Indian community stems from the fact that being a Hindu is tantamount to belonging to the culture.

Ngugi harmonizes with Thurman's assessment. Moreover, Ngugi maintains further that language is another major artery of culture that imperialism has obliterated. He decries that perhaps the most devastating bombshell that Christian imperialists have ever dropped was their intent to decimate other languages and therefore destroy other cultures. Ngugi relates how beneficial learning about life and therefore his culture became when he learned to speak his native language of Gikuyu. He illustrates this importance by recalling that:

We therefore learned to value words for their meaning and nuances. Language was not a mere string of words. It had a suggestive power well beyond the immediate meaning. Our appreciation of the suggestive magical power of language was reinforced by the games we played with words through riddles, proverbs, transpositions of syllables, or through nonsensical but musically arranged words. So we learned the music of our language on top of the content. The language, through images and symbols, gave us a view of the world, but it had a beauty of its own. The home and the field were then our pre-primary school but what is important, for this discussion, is that the language of our evening teach-ins, and the language of our immediate and wider community, and the language of our work in the fields were one.⁴²

Ngugi further suggests that when he went to the colonial school all of the harmony of his culture was not just disrupted, but altogether shattered. He states that,

⁴² Ibid., 11.

“The language of my education was no longer the language of my culture.”⁴³ Moreover, Ngugi offers additional evidence of the cultural decimation of Kenya through the imperialistic practice of language obliteration. He maintains that in 1952, a declaration of a state of emergency over Kenya’s schools was enacted. As a result, all schools run by patriotic nationalists were taken over by the colonial regime and were placed under District Education Boards chaired by the British. English became the language formal education. Ngugi remembers that it was a, “most humiliating experience being caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school.” He continues that, “the culprit was given corporal punishment—three to five strokes of the cane on the bare buttocks – or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with the inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY.” The rejection of culture was reinforced by the British who levied monetary penalties on students’ families.

Finally, Ngugi laments that, “Children were turned into witch hunters and in the process were being taught the lucrative value of being a traitor to one’s immediate community.”⁴⁴

In *Asia and Western Dominance* K.M. Panikkar believes that the dominance imposed over people of color by Western Christian culture has to do with the issue of tolerance of other cultures, without compromising what the West stands for. Panikkar writes that, “The real issue, which was raised by them, related to the rites question, i.e. how far it was possible to tolerate outward conformity with national (Chinese) practices

⁴³ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 11.

without compromising Western teachings.”⁴⁵ It is interesting to note however, that despite the chasm that existed between aristocrats and the marginalized European whites, including women, Methodist Christianity provided some equity and a social identity that people of color could never have hoped to attain. Jean Comaroff states that:

Christianity promised a novel source of influence and control; the mission was a tangible embodiment of force—guns, water, the plow, the written word, and the underlying power that animated them—which professed its availability to all who would believe. It also offered a positive social identity: within it, structural marginality was redefined as membership in the society of the saved.⁴⁶

This kind of alliance gives one the impression that the concept of brotherly love was something that was envisioned and perhaps practiced among Western Europeans to some degree. Conversely, Comaroff suggests that Methodist policy was significantly different when it came to dealing with those whom missionaries deemed uncivilized. Missionaries behaved less brotherly toward people of color. Comaroff posits that, “In fact, collective dance and song were especially offensive to the Christians.”⁴⁷ Many of the missionaries attended the native dances with the intent of opposing them and then preaching the gospel to the savages. Comaroff continues that:

If collective rites in general offended the Protestant sense of the religious, seeming to celebrate mindless superstition in the place of individual contemplation, then dancing was particularly distasteful. In its obvious “salacious” Tswana form, it conflated body and spirit, and proclaimed an ascendancy of the flesh that was inimical to the Puritan temperament.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ K.M. Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1969), 287.

⁴⁶ Jean Comaroff, *Body Of Power Spirit Of Resistance* (Chicago: Chicago Press, 1985), 150.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

In essence, Comaroff's point is that not even Christians could escape the temptation to demoralize another culture if that culture went against the grain of the Western way.

Perhaps this is the exact sentiment the Indian barrister intended to convey to Howard Thurman in their tension filled meeting held in India in 1935. On the second day at Ceylon, Thurman had coffee with this rather brilliant barrister. The barrister shocked Thurman with his query. He asked

"What are you doing here?" he said, "More than four hundred years ago your African forebears were taken from the Western coast of Africa by slave traders who were Christians; in fact, not only was the name of one of the English slave vessels Jesus, but one of your very celebrated hymn writers was a dealer in the slave traffic. You were sold in America to other Christians. You were held in slavery for three hundred years by Christians. You were free a little more than seventy years ago by a man who, himself, was not a Christian but was a shepherd of certain political, economic and social forces the full significance of which he, himself, did not quite understand."⁴⁹

The barrister went on to accuse Thurman of "being a traitor to all the darker people of the world."⁵⁰ With this scathing rebuke Thurman's mind must have been reeling. However, the barrister's assessment was accurate and undeniable. It was easy for Thurman to observe how devastating the effects of imperialism had been to people of color around the world, but it was harder for him to wrap his mind around what white imperialistic Christians had done in America. Due to imperialism in America, blacks were stripped from their homeland of Africa and their immediate family ties ruthlessly broken, thus causing the primary social unit of the family to be destroyed. Thurman

⁴⁹ Walter E. Fluker and Catherine Tumber, *A Strange Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 200-211.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 205.

observes that, "There is no more hapless victim than one who is cut off from family, from language, from one's roots."⁵¹ Thurman felt that this rupture always resulted in the severing of the link that gave the individual African a sense of persona.⁵²

Alex Haley brought this truth to the silver screen in 1974, in his epic made-for-television saga, *Roots*. One of the most significant characters in this saga was Kunta Kente. The story of Kunta was about a young African man who was desperately attempting to hold onto the last vestiges of his African culture. However, once he became the property of the white master, he and all other slaves were forbidden to speak their native languages. They were also prohibited from using their names given at birth. The use of his own name was the reason for Kunte to be beaten severely. In arguably the most memorable, and certainly the most graphic scenes of the series, Kunte Kente is dangling high off the ground, after being tied up with a rope draped over a huge willow tree branch, suspending his body in mid-air. Lash after lash is administered and chunk after chunk of flesh is ripped from his body, until Kunte finally complied with the wishes of the master and says, "My name is Toby."

The Westernization of People of Color

Another identifying mark of Western imperialism which has been allowed to masquerade as authentic Christianity is the Westernization of people of color. By Westernization I mean the imposing influence of the white European Christian culture upon peoples of color. As a result, many people of color have been left to consider whether God is in fact, a white racist. William R. Jones takes up this question. In his first

⁵¹ Howard Thurman, *Deep River* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945), 35.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 35.

proposition, Jones puts forth that, “God does not value all men equally; consequently He treats them differently. And this difference is not accidental but central to His will and purpose.”⁵³ Howard Thurman’s premise sharply contrasts the premise set forth by Jones. Thurman saw the influence of white Westernization closely while on his journey in India. Furthermore, he contended that white Westernization was another brand of imperialism. Thurman holds that this kind of imperialism forces those it subjugates to mimic the dominant culture. Thurman argues that the proof of this is evident in that the, “Indian Christian singing western hymns, wearing Western clothes are inclined to think of the God of the Christian religion in terms of the ideology of the dominant controlling European of his country.”⁵⁴ For Thurman, placing the blame on God would be unthinkable. He seems to recognize, like Paul, that the struggle the people of color faced was not with flesh and blood. Paul wrote, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against spiritual forces wickedness in the heavenly places”⁵⁵ Eph. 6:12 NASB. It is easy to understand, however, why Jones and others might maintain this point of view, when one considers the high frustration, doubt and the possibility of God’s malevolence. Jones places this perception squarely against the privilege that the white Western Christians have enjoyed. If Jones’ hypothesis is correct, then not only is God a white racist, but Christianity is a white man’s religion. We will look more in depth at this issue in a later chapter.

⁵³ William R. Jones, *Is God A White Racist?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 203.

Walter Rauschenbusch was correct when he said that, “A man is moral when he is social; he is immoral when he is anti-social.”⁵⁶ He meant that the goodness that all men are capable of can only be shown to the world to the degree that a person or a group of people are willing to treat their fellow human beings rightly. When this occurs, true social life simultaneously occurs as well. Rauschenbusch contended additionally that, “All human goodness must be social goodness. A man is fundamentally gracious and morality consists in being a good member of his community.”⁵⁷ What is abundantly clear at this point is that wherever there is an unwillingness to freely share the gospel, and even more, allow people the freedom to interpret the same as an expression of their indigenous culture, then the true gospel of Christ has not been shared and the entire community has been defrauded of authentic Christianity. Instead that community has been duped by an imperialistic imitation that seeks to clone everyone it encounters into a Western mold.

Western Christianity, Social Segregation and People of Color

For Howard Thurman, segregation threatened to ravage the sound judgment of both black and white people alike. He said, if allowed to run its course, segregation would undermine all civic character along with democracy itself.⁵⁸ Thurman believed that the only environment in which it was possible for segregation to exist in was one that

⁵⁶ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity And The Social Crisis* (London: Macmillan & Co., LTD, 1907), 67.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 211.

tolerated the marginalization between people who were relatively weak and others who were relatively strong. He felt that the decided advantage was on the side of the relatively strong. In his mind, this was true primarily because the relatively strong possessed the ability to separate themselves from the weak. Thurman holds that, "The strong may separate themselves in certain ways from the weak, but because the initiative remains in their hands they are at liberty to shuttle back and forth between the prescribed areas."⁵⁹

This dual reality for the strong on one hand was being lived out as the unfortunate antithesis of the weak, on the other hand. The weak did not possess the option of mobility. Therefore, they remained segregated by societal roadblocks. Thurman postulated that there were critical psychological issues for both the weak and the strong, as a consequence of the will to segregate. In the case of the weak there are at least two daunting outcomes. He maintains that, "Segregation dramatizes a stigma, and becomes a badge of inferiority. A group segregated systemically over many generations experiences a decisive undermining of self-respect."⁶⁰ Thurman goes on to say that, "There is ever the possibility of the acceptance of segregation, with its concomitant conscious admission of inferiority, of humiliation, of despair. Men who are despised, or who are treated systemically as if they were despised, are apt to despise themselves."⁶¹

While Thurman accurately points out the pitfalls of segregation, the human tendency here is to wonder if there are any plausible solutions on the horizon. Tony Brown seems to think so. Brown suggests that as a result of segregation America has lost

⁵⁹ Ibid., 214.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 214.

⁶¹ Ibid., 214.

her competitive edge and is in need of a make-over. He therefore puts forth an idea that he calls Team America. Brown argues that, “Team America is about ridding this nation of the crippling debt and the twin shackles of entitlement socialism and racism. It is about encouraging Americans to embrace two foreign, but liberating concepts—sacrifice and change.”⁶² Brown feels that unless Team America gets its act together, all Americans--white, black green, or purple—America will perish in the dust of World economies that are increasingly becoming stronger and more united every day.

As Thurman considered the stronger group, he observed that for them the consequence of segregation was their acceptance of a false sense of superiority. When a false sense of superiority has invaded members of the group that is strong, they in turn consider members of the weaker group as odious, and tend to meet them with a great deal of contempt. I have personally observed that sometimes this attitude of superiority can be present in a member of the strong group, and yet remain undetected by that person. For example, not long ago a friend and I were having a conversation about racial issues. As we discussed the plight of black people in America some 140 years after the emancipation proclamation was enacted, he observed that not much progress had been made. Moreover, he pointed out that of all the minorities, although blacks had been in America the longest, they were arguably the worst off educationally, economically, socially and politically. Then he suggested, “If you guys could just learn to work together like the Jews, Asians, Hispanics and all other minorities, you might be better off.” While my friend’s comments were not spoken with a malicious intent, they serve as a demonstration of the validity of Dr. Thurman’s hypothesis about the false sense of

⁶² Tony Brown, *Black Lies, White Lies* (New York: Quill, 1995), 208.

superiority that is developed by the stronger group. When segregation has been accepted as the norm, it is easy for this to happen.

Finally, on the issues of Western Christianity, social structure and people of color, Howard Thurman delivered a penetrating and indicting query to all people of faith. First, he argues that:

If the will to segregate is relaxed in the church then the resources of the mind and spirit and power that are already in the church can begin working formally and informally on the radical changes that are necessary if the church is to become Christian.⁶³

Because Thurman sees the church as a change agent, he also understands his own role here to be that of a herald. But rather than merely deliver the message in the form of powerful statements, he accomplishes the same end through the effective use of questions. Thurman actually delivered seven potent questions. However, because of limited space we will only examine two. In the first of these two questions, Thurman asks:

What do we mean when we teach the brotherhood of man, when over and over again we give the sanction of our religion and the weight of our practice to those subtle anti-Christian practices expressed in segregated churches and even in segregated graveyards?⁶⁴

Next, Thurman asks, “Can we expect more of the state, of the body politic, of industry than we expect of the church?”⁶⁵ Thurman’s point seems to be that the only remedy against the ravaging effect of segregation is Christians who are willing to step out

⁶³ Ibid., 216.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 217.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 217.

from behind the walls of separateness and obliterate the crushing vise-like grip of this imperialistic institution. For Thurman, failure by Christians to respond in a favorable manner would be unchristian. To put it another way, as Walter Rauschenbusch observed about Christian inaction concerning the industrial revolution, "The moral forces in humanity failed to keep pace with intellectual and economic development."⁶⁶ The moment Christians allow this to happen, injustice reigns!

⁶⁶ Ibid., 218.

CHAPTER II

Christian Community & Struggle for a True Gospel

For Howard Thurman, the belief in Christian community as a transformative agent in the world issues from the true Christian message that is found in the person of Jesus Christ. Moreover, it is central to understanding the principles that govern Kingdom dwelling. Dr. Thurman discovered, however, that an ugly dialectic may be what separates how both people of color and privileged white people have tended to view the gospel message, Jesus Christ, and consequently the Kingdom of God Thurman maintained that:

It is a truth recognized over and over again in various guises that the key to the meaning of life is found deep within each one of us. When Jesus insists that the Kingdom is within, he is affirming that which is a part of the common experience of the race. Incidentally, this is one of the unique things about Jesus: he calls attention again and again to that which is so utterly a part of the deep common place experience of life.¹

Dr. Thurman's point is that the very purpose of humankind is fully expressed in one's participation in righteousness, justice and compassion toward his/ her fellow being. In this regard, children of God help to transform the world, and therefore the entire human race, through the message that Jesus proclaimed: The Kingdom of God.²

The Kingdom message is not merely a practice of theology or the empowerment of the church. Instead, the message of the Kingdom of God is one of right practice

¹ Walter E. Fluker and Catherine Tumber, *A Strange Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 131.

² Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury 1944), 27.

between human beings that dwell in community. In fact, the message of the Kingdom is an irreplaceable theology. It is a theology without which the whole of Christianity suffers. To this end, Walter Rauschenbusch observes:

That the loss of a single tooth from the arch of the mouth in childhood may spoil the symmetrical development of the skull and produce malfunctions affecting the mind and character. The atrophy of that idea which had occupied the chief place in the mind of Jesus, necessarily affected the conception of Christianity, the life of the Church, the progress of humanity and the structure of theology.³

What we are able to establish at this juncture is that the message of the Kingdom of God is arguably the most important message to have ever entered the human ear. Moreover, it is perhaps the most prolific message that will ever be proclaimed about community in the future. The Kingdom of God is also the message that Jesus himself proclaimed. The message of God's Kingdom is a divine message spoken to peasant, aristocrat, and royalty alike. This message comes to humanity without concern for one's personal status within the community. This is what Howard Thurman was most excited about and what Rauschenbusch called the social gospel itself⁴.

Rauschenbusch posits, "Without it, the idea of redeeming the social order will be but an annex to the orthodox conception of the scheme of salvation. It will live like a negro servant family in a detached cabin back of the white man's house in the South."⁵

Rauschenbusch's statement reminds us that any theology that is void of the theology of the Kingdom of God is entirely a theology without the power of God.

³ Ibid., 133.

⁴ Ibid., 131.

⁵ Ibid., 131.

Kingdom theology is concerned with every aspect and station of mankind's existence. One could then argue that Kingdom of God theology is nothing more than an example of a model community, or Utopia. Thurman would agree that this is a correct assessment. But he would not stop there. Thurman believed that the theology of Kingdom of God is an expression of the Creator's intent in creation to establish community as a literal fact in the fulfillment of life at every level.⁶ Conrad Boerma's idea about community agrees with that of Howard Thurman. In Boerma's conception of community, however, he conceives that the principle of righteousness is tantamount to producing any cohesive community. He argues that:

Righteousness is an all-embracing concept. It is concerned with the whole of the covenant, the totality of relationships between God and man and animals and things. To reduce it to material circumstances, to the relationship between the poor and rich, can even lead to one-sidedness. We may be right to be one-sided, but at the same time we must realize that the bible does not consider poverty only in terms of structures. It also sees poverty in terms of mutual solidarity. Poverty is not just a matter of politics; it is just as much an attack on the unity of the people of God. It is intolerable for the community that one person's status should be totally different from that of another.⁷

The Old Testament also speaks to the issue of community. In Deuteronomy 15:4, the scripture says that there is to be no poverty in the land. Boerma points out that, "The fact that nevertheless there are poor, and that they are abandoned to their poverty, is proof that the people of God have ceased to be the people of God."⁸

⁶ Howard Thurman, *The Search For Common Ground* (Indiana: Friends United Press, 1973), 46.

⁷ Conrad Boerma, *The Rich, The Poor And The Bible* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978), 66.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

It follows then, that Kingdom theology includes the need of the poor to be understood. One of the most passionate arguments within the black community, including Christian blacks, concerns the absence of understanding by the larger culture. Blacks feel that whites, including Christian whites, don't attempt to understand the black social plight. This gap has produced feelings of alienation and worse—second class citizenship. T.W. Manson argues that, "The fact with which we have to reckon at all times is that in the teaching of Jesus his conception of God determines everything, including the conceptions of the Kingdom and the Messiah."⁹ Ladd adds that, "If the Kingdom is the rule of God, then every aspect of the Kingdom must be derived from the character and action of God."¹⁰ This however, is not the case today. Howard Thurman explains the need to be understood in these terms:

Here the need is for being understood, for being accepted in terms of one's intrinsic worth rather than merely for what one has or does not. It is a hunger for counting in solely for one's self, rather than because of what one has to contribute or to share, or because of one's status, one's parents, one's background, or any trappings by which personality seeks on various occasions to express itself. There is no feeling quite comparable to the adult feeling that someone cares for you as you without any extras involved.¹¹

The need for being understood is accurately outlined by Dr. Thurman. Moreover, Thurman's point underscores the crux of an issue and discussion which took place at a neighborhood meeting on September 4, 2005 in North Portland. The meeting addressed what was considered to be the proper care for, as well as representation of, volunteers

⁹ T.W. Manson, *The teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge: University Press, 1935), 211.

¹⁰ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 79.

¹¹ Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter* (Indiana: Friends United Press, 1972), 106.

helping the New Orleans flood evacuees. A pervasive sense of insensitivity seemed to govern how some members of the Red Cross treated would-be black volunteers. While white volunteers were quickly being processed on the spot, black volunteers at the same facility were told that the Red Cross had all the volunteers needed. When members of the Red Cross were reminded that a good number of evacuees were black and needed to see some black faces from Portland's black community and faith based community, some Red Cross personnel became angry. One Red Cross woman volunteer even called a woman from the black community a nigger, and then promptly called the police to have the black volunteers physically removed from the facility. There is no question in my mind that these rogue Red Cross workers represent the few. However, for those spiritually weak members of the black community, the exercise of tolerance toward this kind of behavior is unthinkable. The question raised by them was, "If you don't care to understand how we feel, why should we think it will be any different when the evacuees get here? Don't you think they've already been through enough?" What was painfully apparent to me was that no effort was made to understand the needs of either Portland's black community or the evacuees. Howard Thurman was right when he posited:

Many and varied are the interpretations dealing with the teachings and the life of Jesus of Nazareth. But few of these interpretations deal with what the teachings and the life of Jesus have to say to those who stand with their backs against the wall. To those who need profound succor and strength to enable them to live in the present with dignity and creativity, Christianity often has been sterile and of little avail. The conventional Christian word is muffled, confused and vague. Too often the price exacted by society for security and respectability is that the Christian movement in its formal expression must be on the side of the strong against the weak. This is a matter of tremendous significance, for it reveals to what extent a religion that was born of a people acquainted with persecution and suffering has become the cornerstone of a civilization and of nation whose very position in

modern life has too often been secured by a ruthless use of power applied to the weak and defenseless peoples.¹²

Thurman's point speaks to many affluent Christians in our society today. Many rarely if ever have intentional contact with the poor. In most cases, their only contact with the poor is superficial and unintentional. The underlying consequence of this lack of exposure is a skewed view of the mission of Jesus and how Christians are to follow His example in dealing with the poor. Regrettably, it becomes easy to see the poor as the Pharisee saw the Tax collector. Lk 18:10-14. Moreover, in the end, many in the affluent class can only see the speck that is in the eyes of the poor; but they miss the log in their own eyes. Matt. 7:3-5 NASB. To present it another way, they can't understand why the poor can't help themselves.

Just after the Northridge earthquake in 1994, The Salvation Army served thousands of people who had been devastated as a result of this powerful quake.

For a solid month, my job was to feed the people from a designated canteen. My partner and I noticed that the same people were coming for each of the three meals. One particular night, I shall never forget. My partner, who was a white officer, said to one of the men, "Don't you think it's about time that you get a job, so that somebody else can have a turn taking the free food? The man angrily replied, "You Christians are all alike!" In my estimation, this incident underscores Thurman's point that, "The conventional Christian word is muffled, confused and vague. Too often the price exacted by society for security and respectability is that the Christian movement in its formal expression must be on the side of the strong against the weak."

¹² Ibid., 11-12.

Needless to say, a similar exchange was at work between white Red Cross volunteers and members of the black community. Nothing about this exchange resembled the teachings or life of Jesus, or the Kingdom of God. This kind of behavior is anything but Christian. More than that, it is an absolutely abysmal display of brotherly love. Perhaps this kind of behavior toward one's fellow, actually speaks to what she or he thinks about God.

A. W. Tozer maintains, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."¹³ He goes on to say, "A right conception of God is basic not only to systematic theology but to practical Christian living as well. It is to worship what the foundation is to temple; where it is inadequate or out of plumb the whole structure must sooner or later collapse."¹⁴ Tozer rightly contends that one's conception of God critically reveals one's heart as well as how one behaves in community.

Thurman, however, argues that when we are talking about Christians, especially those who wield power in the community of faith, we are not only including what one thinks about God, but we must take account of how one behaves toward others. This is Christian. Thurman postulates:

It is certainly to the glory of Christianity that it has been most insistent on the point of responsibility to others whose only claim upon one is the height and depth of their need. This impulse at the heart of Christianity is the human will to share with others what one has found meaningful to oneself elevated to the height of a moral imperative. But there is a lurking danger in this very emphasis. It is exceedingly difficult to hold oneself free from a certain contempt for those whose predicament makes moral appeal for defense and succor. It is the sin of pride and

¹³ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge Of The Holy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

arrogance that has tended to vitiate the missionary impulse and to make of it an instrument of self-righteousness on the one hand and racial superiority on the other.¹⁵

The real question at the crux of the issue has to do with behavior between Christians, both white and black, living in community. What hinders the true gospel message, and thus impedes building a true Christian community? Howard Thurman surmised that there were two fundamental causes of this blockage. First, he contended that a misinterpretation of who Jesus was belies the issue. Secondly, Thurman posits that an ugly dialectic continues to flaw how blacks and whites understand the message of the gospel.

To begin, Jesus was not rich, nor did he possess blond hair, blue eyes and a silver spoon. These are a few of the misconceptions that some upper class white Christians believe, although they may not ever voice them. Moreover, a number of the same group behaves as though Jesus' message confirms their social position and chosen ness. However, this is not the case. Jesus was born a poor Palestinian Jew. This means that he was actually born without privilege. To underscore this point, the gospel of Luke concerning Jesus' birth and the day of his dedication in the temple, tells us that Jesus was brought to the temple on the eighth day as the Law of Moses prescribes. His mother, Mary, offered up turtledoves or pigeons for her first born son. 'This is significant because text reveals that the mother of Jesus was one whose means were not sufficient for a lamb as the law called for.'¹⁶ Therefore, Mary brought what she could afford. Thurman points

¹⁵ Ibid., 13.

¹⁶ Ibid., 17.

out that, “The economic predicament with which Jesus was identified in birth placed him initially with the great mass of people on earth.”¹⁷ Moreover, Jesus was subject to both persecution and suffering. This is the legacy of the disinherited. Furthermore, Jesus, like other Palestinian Jews, was predisposed to view life from the other side of the tracks. For his people there was no one in government to champion their cause or to appeal to for any injustice they may have suffered. They, like Jesus, lived as Thurman said, “with their backs against the wall.”¹⁸

The misinterpretation about Jesus is not only that he represented the powerful and dominant who are always in opposition to the oppressed; it also concerns his message. The message of Jesus is not one of nonresistance, which forces persons in the weaker group to assimilate into the culture and the social behavior-pattern of the dominant group. Dr. Thurman argues that this kind of capitulation “makes for a strategic loss of self-respect. This was the primary strength of imperialism. Walter Rauschenbusch contends that, “The God whom Jesus bore within him was not the God of one nation. The reign of God which he meant to establish was not a new imperialism with the chosen people on top of the pile.”¹⁹ He goes on to say, “The gospels show us Jesus in the act of crossing the racial boundary lines and outgrowing nationalistic religion.”²⁰ The most overwhelming evidence about the message of Jesus confirms that it was that of

¹⁷ Ibid., 17.

¹⁸ Ibid., 11.

¹⁹ Ibid., 161.

²⁰ Ibid., 161.

restoration of the human race (especially the disinherited) in order that people might reflect the glory of God. Thurman observed about Jesus' message that:

In the midst of this psychological climate Jesus began his teaching and his ministry. His words were directed to the house of Israel, a minority within the Greco-Roman world, smarting under the loss of status, freedom, and autonomy, haunted by the dream of the restoration of a lost glory and former greatness. His message focused on the urgency of a radical change in the inner attitude of people. He recognized fully that out of the heart are the issues of life and that no external force, however great and overwhelming, can at long last destroy a people if it does not first win the victory of the spirit against them.²¹

Additionally, the gospel message of Jesus reminded the poor that, "To revile because one has been reviled—this is the real evil because it is the evil of the soul itself."²²

Howard Thurman spent countless hours contemplating the problem of how so many ills and inconsistencies could exist within the realm of Christianity. In what became quite an historic meeting in India with Mahatma Gandhi, Thurman asked the Indian leader, "What is the greatest hindrance to Christianity in India?"²³ To that question, Gandhi replied, "The greatest enemy that the religion of Jesus has in India is Christianity in India."²⁴ As Thurman considered this problem blocking the message of Jesus, he pondered the tremendous injustices his own people had endured. He in fact thought about slavery and his own grandmother, who was an ex-slave. These thoughts in turn caused Thurman to remember his youth in Daytona Beach, Florida, and a particular occasion

²¹ Ibid., 21.

²² Ibid., 21.

²³ Ibid., 205.

²⁴ Ibid., 205.

when he was on summer break. As a college student, he found that his primary responsibility was to read scripture to his grandmother. She was very specific about which scriptures she would allow Howard to read. For example, it was acceptable for him to read from the book of Isaiah, Psalms, the Prophets and all of the gospels. However, Thurman was not permitted to read from any of the Apostle Paul's writings, with the exception of First Corinthians 13. Thurman questioned his elderly grandmother about her obvious objection to his reading any of the writings of Paul. Her reply to him remained etched in his mind. She said:

During the days of slavery, the master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Old man McGhee was so mean that he would not let a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: 'Slaves be obedient to your masters..., as unto Christ.' Then he would go on to show how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible.²⁵

As Thurman continued pondering the issue presented by his grandmother, he concluded that at the heart of this problem stood an ugly dialectic, or a parallel in contrast. Within the gospels of Jesus and the writings of the apostle Paul, he detected two truths held in dynamic tension. On one hand, in the eyes of the disinherited, Jesus was the new Moses, poised to lead the poor and downtrodden into the Promised Land. On the other hand, the apostle Paul represented those who lived with privilege. Indeed, Paul was a man of privilege himself and if mistreated, could make an appeal to the Roman government for justice. This was Paul's reality based on the distinct advantage of possessing dual citizenship. He was a Palestinian Jew as well as a Roman citizen. Thurman recognized that the same was true for anyone who comes from a lifestyle of

²⁵ Ibid., 30-31.

privilege. In the case of many white Christians, this privilege of dual “first class” citizenship applies in that they are “first class” citizens of both America and the Kingdom of God.

Thurman, therefore, concluded that the question that had to be settled for anyone who exists in the reality of the disinherited is: What is my attitude toward the rulers and the controllers of political, social, and economic life? Moreover, Thurman maintained that, “there was no room for Fanaticism and Zealot like behavior.”²⁶ This means that Thurman would detest any radical behavior that is intended to be retaliatory.

Dr. Thurman would agree that a cornerstone philosophy of a righteous community begins with citizens, whether poor or rich, who abide by the law. To this extent, one could argue, that Nazism functions in that way. John Yoder contends that, “Until the crisis of Nazism struck into the heartland of Protestant theological scholarship, there was little question about the centrality and adequacy of (Romans. 13:1-7NASB) as the foundation of a Christian doctrine of the state.”²⁷ Yoder goes on to say:

It seems to be said here quite unambiguously that government is established by God and that Christians are therefore to obey their government, not only because they fear its sanctions but because they conscientiously support its function of repressing evil and encouraging good.”²⁸

While this may be the ideal, not all members of the disinherited community of faith agree with Thurman and Yoder. Some have resorted to behavior that could be considered to be zealot-like. They have determined that the only way to gain respect and

²⁶ Ibid., 26.

²⁷ John H. Yoder, *The Politics Of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1972), 193.

²⁸ Ibid., 193.

“personhood” is through brute force. One example of such a person is Malcolm X. In his book entitled *By Any Means Necessary*, X says:

The Negro has already given up on nonviolence. This new-thinking Negro is beginning to realize that when he demonstrates for what the government says are his rights, then the law should be on his side. Anyone standing in front of him reclaiming his rights is breaking the law. Now, you’re not going to have a lawbreaking element inflicting violence upon Negroes who are trying to implement the law, so that when they begin to see this, like this, they are going to strike back. In 1964 you’ll find Negroes will strike back. There never will be nonviolence anymore, that has run out;.²⁹

Howard Thurman would condemn this kind of retaliation. He believed in the Christian community as a transforming agent in the world. Moreover, Thurman maintained confidence in Jesus and his teachings about the Kingdom of God within us. However, Thurman was not naïve enough to believe that the community of faith was without its challenges with status, culture, and race. In the next chapter, we will discover Dr. Thurman’s approach to these issues and how that approach led to his huge spiritual breakthrough.

²⁹ Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary* (New York: Pathfinder, 1964), 11.

CHAPTER III

Howard Thurman's New Insight on Christianity

He was a pioneer, mystic, scholar, and poet; all these titles are his. He wanted to erase all barriers between God and man and between man and man. Howard Thurman never exhorted, cajoled, or pounded on the lectern. Instead, he turned human hearts to the inner Light if they would allow him. Moreover, he was a theological giant. Thurman's love for learning is well documented, as is his seemingly unlikely association with the Friends and therefore, mysticism. "That Howard Thurman is not a household name is a situation that may soon change as more and more folks search for a unique aspect of spirituality in their lives."¹ These are just a few of the reasons that Howard Thurman is considered by many to be one of the most intriguing personalities of his generation.

Without question, Rufus Jones was one of the most influential persons to cross Thurman's path. What Thurman learned from the Quaker mystic became the theological framework that he visibly implemented and employed throughout his life. In particular, Thurman was most intrigued by Jones' concept of man being a conscious spirit made in the image of the divine. Interestingly enough, it is this concept that clearly undergirds Thurman's practical theology.

Another very influential, and life changing relationship that helped to shape Howard Thurman's life was the relationship he formed with Mahatma Gandhi.

¹ Walter E. and Tumber Fluker, Catherine, *Strange Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 131.

Thurman was asked in 1935 to lead a contingent of black students on an eight-month tour of India. This tour was called the Pilgrimage of Friendship. During this time, Thurman and the students covered over 18,000 miles. The highlight of the tour was a meeting with Gandhi. Thurman and Gandhi met on a mountain top for three hours. Many things were discussed that day. Gandhi enthusiastically schooled Thurman in the finer points of nonviolent and peaceful protest. This was definitely something that Thurman would add to his theological arsenal. Additionally, as we have already discussed, the question that Thurman posed to Gandhi about who Jesus' greatest enemy in India was, had the most profound effect on the theologian's life. Gandhi's response took Thurman by surprise. As a consequence, Thurman spent the rest of that day in deep reflection. He contemplated whether he could remain in a tradition that not only permitted, but fostered, segregation and separateness. Gandhi's reply was not something that Thurman could dismiss.

Thurman needed to glean new insights about Christianity. As Thurman immersed himself in quiet reflection, he came to what would amount to his great theological breakthrough. Thurman recognized that Jesus was and must be the subject, not the object, of religious worship. When Thurman refers to Jesus being the subject of worship, he intends that Jesus is not merely limited to the historical figure that he was. But as God, Jesus is a colossal ideal. He must be viewed along with his message as someone to be studied. Thurman would later combine this view with mysticism as an agent for social change.

The exact source of Thurman's conception that Jesus had to be the subject, not the object, of religious worship is not known for certain. Thurman never disclosed or gave

credit to any particular individual. However, we can deduce from the writings of others that this idea of Jesus being the subject of religious worship was conceived out of Thurman's prayer life and his relationships others, such as Stanley Jones and more importantly, Mahatma Gandhi.

For one thing, Stanley Jones and Gandhi were Thurman's companions and contemporaries. In South Africa, Jones interviewed Gandhi on the subject of Christianity. Gandhi was almost persuaded to become a Christian, but how could he truly see Christ in the midst of all of the racism of the time? In his book *Mahatma Gandhi—An Interpretation*, Stanley Jones points out that, "The decision of the Mahatma not to become Christian was arrived at in South Africa. A great deal of pressure from within and without was brought to bear on the Mahatma to become a Christian—some of it legitimate and natural, and some otherwise."

Jones comments further that, "It was not easy for him to decide to be a Christian in the race-heavy atmosphere of South Africa."² The difficulty for Gandhi was not what he learned about Jesus and his Kingdom of God philosophy; rather, it was what he observed in the behavior of those who worshipped Jesus as a religious object or symbol. When Jones asked Gandhi how Christians could make it possible for Christianity to be naturalized in India, not as a foreign entity, but as part of India's national life, Gandhi's reply was:

First, I would suggest that all of you Christians, missionaries, and all, must begin to live more like Jesus Christ. Second, practice your religion without adulterating it or toning it down. Third, emphasize love and make it your working force, for love is central to Christianity. Fourth, study the non-Christian religions more

sympathetically to find the good that is in them, in order to have a more sympathetic approach to the people.²

It had been said of Gandhi that “he was a natural Christian.”³ That is to say that Mahatma Gandhi not only studied the life of Christ, but he lived his life as closely to Christ’s as anyone could. Jones argues that, “He was a Hindu who was deeply Christianized—more Christianized than most Christians.”⁴ Jones warns however that:

“We must not try to claim him when he himself would probably repudiate that claim. He was a Hindu and belonged to Hinduism; but nevertheless, when we strip away all controversies between East and West, and religion and religion we cannot help recognizing the affinities he had with the faith in Christ.”⁵

It seems reasonable to conclude that because Thurman was armed with this powerful information about the Mahatma, and because he was also faced with very similar circumstances in North America to those which Gandhi faced in South Africa, Thurman could conceivably see Jesus and his teaching as a subject that should be studied. He recognized that Jesus was not an object to worship. Although some followers of Christianity have reduced Jesus into an icon that is venerated as any other icon in the church, for Thurman this would be a mistake. Instead, Thurman conceives that Jesus is much broader than that. He demands that one become a serious student of how Jesus lived, and how Jesus behaved toward his fellows as well as toward the poor. In essence, as Thurman puts it, “Jesus must be seen as an interpretation.” When one views Jesus through this lens, one becomes acquainted with Jesus as the instruction manual for

² Ibid., 52.

³ Ibid., 56.

⁴ Ibid., 56.

⁵ Ibid., 56.

humankind, not a tool that can be manipulated by the rich and powerful to gain an economic, political, or social advantage. Moreover, as Dr. Thurman puts it, “The basic principles of his way of life cut straight through to the despair of his fellows and found it groundless.”⁶

Mysticism and Social Change

What the mystic perceives about the divine will ultimately determine what he/she believes is achievable on the horizontal plain of social change. This brief description is the writer’s interpretation of what Howard Thurman believed about mysticism and social change. Howard Thurman recognized that in order for any significant changes to occur in society, the mystic would have to be intimately involved in all that takes place. He posits:

The basic ethical significance of mysticism is individualistic; this cannot be successfully refuted but it has also been pointed out that even in the moment of vision that the mystic discovers that (his) “private” values are under girded and determined by a structure which far transcends the limits of one’s individual self. The good which is given him must somehow be achieved in a framework of experiences native to his own life “for instances” in a rich variety of details. The ascetic impulse having as its purpose individual purification and living brings the realistic mystic face to face with the society in which he functions as a person. He discovers that he is a person and a personality in a profound sense can only be achieved in a milieu of human relations. Personality is something more than mere individuality—it is a fulfillment of the logic of individuality in community.⁷

To be sure, Thurman was aware of the innumerable types of mysticism and, within that, the varying degrees of it that exist. However, Thurman was primarily concerned with religious mysticism. Within religious mysticism he was particularly intrigued with the duty of those he called the affirmation mystics. Thurman defines an

⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁷ Ibid., 116.

affirmation mystic as, “those who are concerned with working out in a social frame of reference the realism of their mystic experience.”⁸

It seems that Thurman may have borrowed this term, if not the entire concept of an affirmation mystic, from a long time mentor, Rufus Jones. For Jones, what sets this strain of mystics apart from others is their experience with God. More than that, perhaps, is what they do with that ethereal experience once they return to the natural realm. Jones believed that, “not only do they attain direct intercourse between the human soul and God, but in this state, God ceases to be an external object. He in fact, is known through an experience of the heart.”⁹ The affirmation mystic, then, is a willing sharer of what she/he has experienced with the divine. That is to say, this is not an experience meant to be kept a secret. Therefore, the affirmation mystic is both a person and a personality as Dr. Thurman has rightly pointed out. He/she is also bound to a moral obligation to identify with the human community and to relate to others what God has revealed more clearly through His spirit to him or her. In this way, divine intention is able to inform and affect the human will. Thus, through the affirmation mystic, humankind can possess the mind of God.

This is not new, nor is it unbiblical. As a point of fact, the prophet Isaiah may be classified as an affirmation mystic. We find evidence that supports this claim in Chapter 6 of the book of Isaiah. There, the prophet has an intimate encounter with God. When the prophet returns to his state of conscious existence, he is keenly aware that not only was he a man of unclean lips in the presence of God, but that all of humanity dwelling around

⁸ Ibid., 117.

⁹ Rufus M. Jones, *A Dynamic Faith* (London: Headley Brothers, 1900), 50.

him was stricken by lips that were equally unclean. As Thurman correctly observes “it is here that the affirmation mystic’s interests are driven beyond self to the fulfillment of the mystical vision, which binds him/her up in an inexorable relationship to his/her community in which no person living within the fabric of human clothes can expect to be saved alone.”¹⁰

Isaiah seems to epitomize Dr. Thurman’s point. As Isaiah 6:6-7 reveals, the prophet’s lips are purified and his sin is taken away by the touch of the burning coal taken from the altar. However, the people in the community remained unchanged and within their sins. That is until Isaiah, the affirmation mystic, responds to the call of God on behalf of humanity saying, “Here am I. Send me.” Isaiah 6:8. The point that both Thurman and Jones are making about the affirmation mystic is that, in the end, the true mark of an affirmation mystic is altruism. They are willing to sacrifice self for the good of the community. In this light, Christ himself was an affirmation mystic. Not only did he seek intimate union with God the Father, but he was also the embodiment of altruism.

The book of Hebrews encourages:

Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart. Hebrews. 12:2-3 NASB.

Thurman believed that anyone, in effect, could experience a closeness with God similar to that for which the affirmation mystic strives. The linchpin, of course, is seeking the fullness of the vision of God. To this end, Rufus Jones argues that:

¹⁰ Ibid., 117.

It is not an intellectual or an emotional state—it is rather an act of the whole personality. It precedes knowledge and is the ground of knowledge—“he that willeth shall know”; “he that believeth hath the witness.” It gives reality to what the soul hungers and hopes for, and it becomes “the *test* of things not seen” with the physical eye. It is what Paul calls “the demonstration of the spirit.” That means the soul’s direct perception of a spiritual work going on within it, as little to be doubted as the beauty the artist sees or the harmony the musician hears.¹¹

Meister Eckhart agrees. He surmises that the closeness we can experience with God is tantamount to boundless openness. Moreover, it is based on the fact that we were created in God’s image. He writes:

This boundless openness to all that is invites us to ever greater expansion of the soul and consciousness. It is God who does the expanding, If God so changes little things, what do you think he will do with the soul, which he has already fashioned so gloriously in his own image? Once again, we are admonished not to flee dissatisfaction but to recognize it as the proper starting point for a divine adventure. The human spirit does not allow itself to be satisfied with that light it storms the firmament, and scales the heavens until it reaches the spirit that drives the heavens. As a result of heaven’s revolution; everything in the world flourishes and bursts into leaf. The spirit however, is never satisfied; it presses on ever further into the vortex and primary source in which the spirit has its origin.¹²

The influences of Meister Eckhart and Rufus Jones played a huge role in Thurman’s personal breakthrough with Christianity. Rather than running away from the fact that Christianity had some real issues to resolve, Thurman sought to press on into the vortex. To accomplish this, he personally pursued the fullness of the vision of God

¹¹ Ibid., 59.

¹² Matthew Fox, *Breakthrough; Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality* (New York: Image Books, 1991), 117-118.

through quiet and centered prayer. This act of “Centering down” is distinctively Quaker. It was also a huge departure for Thurman, a black Baptist preacher, who was steeped in that tradition. Yet, because Thurman was seeking something far beyond the traditions of a denomination, his hunger and quest for deep relationship and rich experience of God, caused him to break the ranks of both denomination and color barriers. To this end, he feasted on reflections of Jesus in the gospels, along with readings from Jones and Eckhart. In short, as Rufus Jones puts it, Thurman “slipped below the conscious into the subconscious mind.”¹³ In fact, Jones says that, “mysticism is a genius or aptitude for God through the unconsciousness. The prophet, the saint, the mystic, has a subliminal self that opens more immediately upon the divine than others have, or at least he is more sensitive to it.”¹⁴

Perhaps the breakthrough that Thurman sought and experienced explains why the Western Church’s experience with God, and the high levels of intimacy outlined by Jones Eckhart and Thurman, differs greatly. This may also shed some light on what Walter Rauschenbusch suspected all along. Because men have so heavily relied on the church, they tend to “run to tradition and dogma. But where ever the Kingdom is God is taught the most fruitful impulses of prophetic vision for present social problems and the future of human society will be found.”¹⁵ Rauschenbusch’s statement rings true, especially when one considers the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was a protégé of Howard Thurman’s. Through the teaching of Howard Thurman, King was introduced to Jones and

¹³ Ibid., 58.

¹⁴ Ibid., 58.

¹⁵ Ibid., 137.

Eckhart's realm of mysticism. Additionally, Thurman acquainted King with the teaching of the Kingdom message and, therefore, its emphasis on social change and human responsibility. It is often said that the influence of one teacher can help shape the thoughts of an entire generation. If there has ever been any doubt about the validity of that statement, or others like it, the teacher-student relationship between Thurman and King successfully obliterates it. Not only did King implement the lessons he learned from Thurman, Fluker says that "Thurman remained a close confidant of King," who ultimately became the prominent voice of the civil rights movement during the 1950's and 1960's. Furthermore, it can be said that through King, America experienced the power and vivid imagery of a divine dream by an affirmation mystic. In his 1963 speech "I Have a Dream," King shares his divine experience and his yet lofty ambition for the people dwelling in America. He writes:

This note was a promise that all men would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check which has come back marked "insufficient funds." But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation.

So we have come to cash this check—a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice. We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to open the doors of opportunity to all of God's children. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.¹⁶

¹⁶ (Martin Luther King Jr., *I Have A Dream* [Washington D.C. 1963]).

Functioning in the capacity of an affirmation mystic, King saw himself, along with all American people, as possessing not only unclean lips, but unclean hearts before the presence of Holy God. It is obvious that he not only saw the problems of the Christian faith, but that he saw the solution as well. Brueggemann argues that, prophets “are energized not by that which is already possessed but by that which is promised and about to be given.”¹⁷ As Thurman did before him, King pursued the vortex even in the face of losing his life. His connectedness to both the divine and human community would not allow him to shrink from his moral responsibility. This was not only a tribute to King, the person, but also to the personality of Howard Thurman. “Without Howard Thurman, there may never have been a Martin Luther King Jr.”¹⁸

Howard Thurman was a pioneer, mystic, scholar and a poet. He sought to erase all barriers between God and man and between man and man. Howard Thurman experienced God himself. He turned human hearts to the inner Light, and along the way he influenced others to come and join God in a mystical union that possessed the power to transform the world.

In the final chapter, we will discuss Howard Thurman’s theology of brotherly love and the power it possesses for social change to the glory of God.

¹⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Mimneapolis: fortress Press, 2001), 15.

¹⁸ Walter E. Fluker, & Catherine Tumber, eds. *A Strange Freedom; The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious experience*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 10.

CHAPTER IV

Howard Thurman's Emerging Theology of Brotherly Love

Thurman's emerging theology of brotherly love springs from the fact that the love of Christ is the element that brings about healing, wholeness and unity to all Christians. Furthermore, it is this love that transports unity to the entire world. As Thurman sees it, however, before love of brother or sister can be achieved, the poor or disinherited must reckon with fear, deception and hatred. It is only after dealing with these three elements, that one is prepared to truly love his/her brother. The theology itself is simple, but quite profound. For Thurman, the "three hounds of hell"—fear, deception, and hatred—become the device the theologian uses as a metaphor for sin. However, the genius of Thurman's theology is that it infuses divine good into the midst of human evil. Thus, through the redemptive power of love, evil is overcome by good. In this way, the word of God is fulfilled which says, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Rom. 12:21 NASB). In the end it is the good, which is divinely inspired, that is ultimately transformed into brotherly love.

Seemingly empowered by what he had experienced through his union with God, Howard Thurman emerged from his time of deep reflection on Mahatma Gandhi's query invigorated by a new interpretation of Jesus' message that the Kingdom of God is within. While the message itself was not really new, the interpretation of the message was.

In addressing the situation of the people of color in North America, particularly impoverished blacks, Thurman saw afresh those for whom Jesus' message was intended.

Consequently, Thurman sought to aim his message in the same direction in order to address the sense of powerlessness that disinherited people have felt for millennia.

Thurman writes about Jesus' strategy:

Living in a climate of deep insecurity, Jesus, faced with so narrow a margin of civil guarantees, had to find some other basis upon which to establish a sense of well-being. He knew that the goals of religion as he understood them could never be worked out within the then-established order. Deep from within that order he projected a dream, the logic of which would give to all the needful security. There would be room for all, and no man would be a threat to his brother. "The Kingdom of God is within." "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor."¹⁹

The basic principles of his way of life cut through to the despair of his fellows and found it groundless. By inference he says, "You must abandon each other and fear only God. You must not indulge in any deception and dishonesty, even to save your lives. Your words must be Yea-Nay; anything else is evil. Hatred is destructive to hated and hater alike. Love your enemy that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven."²⁰

The Fear of the Disinherited

Dr. Thurman teases out two chief reasons that people of color are possessed by fear. First, Thurman sees that the disinherited, or people of color, have been dogged by the fear of "one sided violence."²¹ This is violence devoid of the element of contest. Thurman said it well, "It is what is feared by the rabbit that cannot escape the hounds.

¹⁹ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1944), 34-35.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

One can almost see the desperation creep into the quivering pulsing body of the frightened animal.”²²

Today we recognize this brand of violence as victimization of the weak. This victimization can include the exploitation of entire groups of people. This occurs when others have superior social, political or economic wherewithal. To be sure, those who possess the wherewithal of any sort, over and against those who do not, produce what becomes a menacing mental threat; fear has, in the past, literally wreaked havoc on the minds of the disinherited. James Cone explains the looming mental anguish he experienced as a youth in Bearden, Arkansas. He writes:

There the meaning of black was defined primarily by the menacing presence of whites, which no African-American could escape. I grew up during the age of Jim Crow (1940s and early ‘50s). I attended segregated schools, drank from “colored” fountains, saw movies from balconies, and when absolutely necessary greeted white adults at the back doors of their homes. I also observed the contempt of brutality that white law meted out to the blacks who transgressed their racial mores or who dared to question their authority. The white people of Bearden, like most Southerners of the time, could be mean and vicious, and I along with other blacks, avoided them whenever possible as if they were poisonous snakes.²³

What Cone outlines well, and what is really at stake here, is understood authority and control. In short, understood authority is a mental manacle used by those who possess control in order to demonstrate they are, in fact, in control. They often accomplish this

²² Ibid., 37.

²³ James Cone, *Risks of Faith* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), ix.

through a show of force. This is the point Cornell West makes. He says that the promotion of fear “has been happening since the inception of the battle between the Constantinian Christianity and the prophetic Christianity” intended by Jesus and later perpetuated by Paul.²⁴ Constantine sought to centralize his power through Christianity, by making Christianity the religion of the emperor. As a consequence, in modern times, many conservative white churches have sought to centralize power within the Christian community by asserting their voice as the authoritative voice for all Christians.

West goes on to argue that the underlying fear felt by Constantinian Christianity of the Roman Empire was evoked by the true Christian message of humility and equality among all human beings. This he maintains, “was a threat to Roman imperial rule.”²⁵ It was also the cause of fear on the part of many followers of the prophetic legacy of Jesus Christ, which led to the paralysis of the Christian church’s true purpose as it became increasingly corrupted by state power and religious rhetoric, both often used to justify imperial aims according to West.²⁶ As Thurman rightly contends, here the power and the tools of violence are on one side.²⁷ In this sense, fear can be compared to the sin of prejudice. It is not a root sin but a secondary or derivative sin. Sarah Sumner observes that “it derives from a basic sense of pride.”²⁸ She continues, “Prejudice arises from the

²⁴ Cornel West, *Democracy Matters* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 147.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁸ Sarah Sumner, *Men And Women In The Church* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2003), 76.

soils of fear and ignorance, though, ironically, prejudice is learned.”²⁹ Thurman observes, however, that fear also has several concomitant elements associated with it. For example, one of Thurman’s arguments is that the greatest fear present is not the fear of dying, but the “deep humiliation arising from dying without benefit of cause or purpose.”³⁰

He continues that “no high end is served.”³¹ “The whole experience attacks the fundamental sense of self-respect and personal dignity, without which a man is no man.”³²

Conversely, behaviorist B.F. Skinner disagrees with Thurman that violence of humiliation is the cause or reason for loss of the fundamental sense of self-respect and personal dignity which strip a man of his manhood. Skinner conjectures that:

The measures are seldom as violent as those recommended by the literature of freedom, probably because loss of credit is in general less aversive than pain or death. They are often in fact merely verbal; we react to those who deprive us of due credit by protesting, opposing, or condemning them and their practices. What is felt when a person protests is usually called resentment, significantly defined as “the expression of indignant displeasure,” but we do not protest because we feel resentful. We both protest and feel

²⁹ Ibid., 76.

³⁰ Ibid., 38.

³¹ Ibid., 38.

³² Ibid., 38.

resentful because we have been deprived of the chance to be admired or to receive credit.³³

Skinner's argument is rational and coherent, but it misses the point raised by Thurman. Perhaps it is proper in the world that Skinner is from, to respond to verbal threats that seek to deprive one of credit by protesting, or condemning the other, including his/her practices. However, that tactic according to Thurman only works if the parties involved are relatively equal powers in society.³⁴ What Mr. Skinner misses is that the fight is not an equitable or fair fight. The issue for the disinherited is not about credit, for the playing field has never been level. The issue is about equal status and the dignity of one's personhood. This is the same position taken by Sarah Sumner, as it relates to the personhood of women. Sumner posits:

Theologically, Christians are eager to say that women are made in the image of God. Socially, however, women are sometimes seen as being less dignified than men. There are some in the church who would openly say that women are less able to handle their emotions and face the harsh reality of life. Though this is not true of all of us, some of us have been taught that women are supposed to be inferior to men. Why else would my professor have told me to "hold back?" In college one of my friends used to take me by the shoulders at arms length and announce to me triumphantly, "You're a person!" I never understood why he said that to me. But I am grateful for his influence in my life. Apparently he perceived that I was subconsciously discounting myself. He saw in me what I see in other women—a hesitation to exult in the dignity of being a woman.³⁵

Additional concomitants to the fear of violence are the acute and building fears of panic or rage. We witnessed these fears on full display in both the 1965 and 1991 Los Angeles

³³ B.F Skinner, *Beyond Freedom & Dignity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc, 1971), 54.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

rebellions. What brings those who feel deprived to this point? Dr. Thurman shed some light on the matter. He told the story of a neighborhood dog that nervously passed the houses on his block each day. Thurman knew the dog was on the block because he would run away yelping at just the motion of an arm being raised as if to throw a stone.³⁶ The dog had obviously been badly wounded before. Now all it took was the raising of an arm and a threat to produce a powerful memory.³⁷ "Fear is the weapon in which the disinherited are held in check."³⁸ Fear takes away self esteem and the sense of belonging. Without these, a deep sense of insecurity develops, which can include an inferiority complex. In Thurman's estimation, the disinherited are constantly given a negative answer to one of life's most important questions: Who am I?³⁹ A second important question of life is: What am I? This speaks to belonging, self-realization and the fulfillment that the human spirit demands.⁴⁰ The answers to both of these questions are addressed by the community of faith. Conrad Boerma observes that:

Jesus is the embodiment of the poor man. He does not attempt to disown this state. He does not look for ways to be reconciled with the state. Ambition and greed are alien to him. From the beginning the community founded by him and rooted in him was characterized by a very practical solidarity. That is why it found universal favor. The members of that community did not address one another by formal titles, and were unconcerned with social status symbols. They did not call one another

³⁶ Ibid., 39.

³⁷ Ibid., 39.

³⁸ Ibid., 41.

³⁹ Ibid., 49.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 53.

‘Your honor’, ‘Your grace’, boss, slave, man or woman: they simply called one another ‘brother’.⁴¹

It is the embrace of brotherhood that acts as a salve over the fear of the disinherited and sometimes dispirited people of color. What’s more, it is through this brotherhood of faith that the sweetest fact is made known to the world. God will take care of the brokenhearted. He will attend their cry. Howard Thurman ably illuminates:

Of course God cares for the grass of the field, which lives a day and is no more, or the sparrow that falls unnoticed by the wayside. He also holds the stars in their appointed places, leaves his mark in every living thing. And he cares for me! To be assured of this becomes the answer to the threat of violence—yea, to violence itself. To the degree to which a man knows this, he is unconquerable from within and without.⁴²

Deception

At the crux of his concern, Thurman says there are a few things about deception we should know. First, he holds that deception is a mechanism used by the disinherited for survival. For example, although a person who is disadvantaged may understand that stealing is wrong, she or he might justify stealing a pair of shoes because they are without. Thurman posits, however, “If a man continues to call a good thing bad, he will eventually lose his sense of moral distinctions.” Thurman also reasons that, “The penalty of deception is to become a deception.” Dr. Thurman meant that anyone belonging to the disinherited group who sought to mimic the deception he/she saw in white society by

⁴¹ Ibid., 70.

⁴² Ibid., 56.

deceiving others for the sole purpose of realizing personal gain, would her/himself become a sham and a disgrace. Perhaps this is what the writer of 1 John meant when he wrote, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”

(1John. 1:8 [NKJV]). The reason this would have been problematic for Thurman is that any denial of self deception is a sin. Moreover, sin prevents the power of God from transforming personal hurts into Kingdom power. For Thurman, this is the very thing that the gospel accomplishes through Jesus Christ and his message: that the Kingdom of God is within you. Second, the disadvantaged may also be fooled by the deception of compromise. The compromise of one’s moral constitution is never moral; it is always amoral. There is no justification for making concessions, as it relates to one’s behavior. For example: There is no moral or justifiable reason to burn a white person’s home down in retaliation for an act committed by a group of whites who, two hours earlier, drove by and threw a Molotov cocktail into the home of a black neighbor. To Thurman, acts such as this are perhaps even more egregious than the initiating act.

Often however, the dialogue about moral righteousness is never discussed because the disenfranchised are too involved in a struggle for their physical survival. When people are trapped in this mode, anything goes. Behaviors may include stealing, larceny, or anything to make ends meet, including killing. “The disinherited in this state cannot hear the gospel. For the gospel at this point is nothing more to them than mere words, and the barren places of the soul must be revitalized. This is perhaps the biggest challenge facing Christianity in modern life, according to Thurman.”⁴³ He goes on to say that “morality takes its meaning from the center. And from the standpoint of the

⁴³ Ibid., 69-76.

disenfranchised, the center stems from the question of 'how not to be killed,' which becomes the great end."⁴⁴ This kind of animalistic "kill or be killed" behavior is quite visible in our society today. In fact, it seems to have overrun most of our urban communities. Perhaps, one of the most pervasive mediums of this anti-humankind message is music. The words of the late Tupac Shakur epitomize the attitude that belies the "kill or be killed" survival mentality. Shakur writes:

I'm "Losin My Religion," I'm vicious on these stool pigeons
 You might be deep in this game, but you got the rules missin
 Niggaz be actin like they savage, they out to get the cabbage
 I got, nuthin but love, for my niggaz livin lavish

Now follow as we riiiiide
 Motherf**k the rest, two of the best from the West side
 And I can make you famous
 Niggaz been dyin for years, so how could they blame us
 I live in fear of a felony
 I never stop bailin these, motherf**kin G's
 If ya got it better flaunt it, another warrant
 2 of Amerikaz Most Wanted⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ibid., 70.

⁴⁵ Seek Lyrics, (Google), www.seeklyrics.com/ (for downloading songs and lyrics; accessed September 28, 2005).

Thurman is right. This is perhaps the biggest challenge facing Christianity in modern life. How can we as a society love those of whom we are generally afraid? A better question is: How can the disenfranchised black community embrace the ones from its own community that it too deeply fears? Put into perspective, Tupac and others like him are literally babes! As a community, the masses have been deceived by the fear and the coldness projected on the faces of our youth, which so obviously emanates from their hearts.

Thurman warns that, "Serious problems arise when a person applies the principles of life seeking to actualize its potential and commitment, toward consciously doing what is evil."⁴⁶ He further maintains, "There is a sense in which it is true the wicked do prosper. When a man has an evil heart, he gives the nerve center of his consent over to evil enterprise, and he receives strength and energy to that end."⁴⁷ There is vitality in demonic enterprise when it becomes the fundamental commitment in life.

I engaged in a brief conversation, not long ago, with a young man whose identity most people would associate with being a gang-banger. I do not know if that was the case, or not. However, during the course of our conversation, I asked him what bothered him most. His reply was, "Not being taken seriously and not being given respect." He also said, "That's why I gotta make my statement." On another occasion, a friend saw three young black men walking, in broad daylight, near the corner of Williams and Killingsworth. The problem was that each of the three youths had on political figure

⁴⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 18.

masks, and each also wore leather gloves. My friend said that she was terrified, but somehow mustered up the courage to ask them why they were wearing masks when it wasn't Halloween. One of the young men responded, "We just want to scare somebody." Another replied, "Ain't no law against wearing a mask during the day!" My friend sternly remarked, "Well, there might not be a law stopping you from wearing a mask, but the police sure might." Many disenfranchised young people are naive. As a result of their immaturity and mistrust of society in general, they are not quite sure what to do about their feelings of fear.

By the same token, many black clergy are equally fearful of dying violently. This kind of fear is inexcusable for the church, and especially for the clergy. While it is true that fear begets fear, it is also true that love is able to extinguish fear. This is a poignant truth pointed out by the apostle John. In John's epistle the NIV renders, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love". (1 John 4:18). In retrospect, Thurman's words at the opening of this section are hauntingly prophetic. Foremost, was his statement that, "Deception is a mechanism used by the disinherited for survival." This was followed by, "If a man continues to call a good thing bad, he will eventually lose his sense of moral distinctions."

Both hit the central nerve of the issue at hand in two ways. First, the statements speak directly to what has happened to the disenfranchised youth in the black community. On one hand, these youth have been allowed to believe that the only thing necessary to gain power is to use the mask of deception to evoke fear. For many of them, this kind of power is tantamount to respect. Unfortunately, on the other hand, they fail to see that this

brand of respect is not respect at all. It may be a sort of “deceptive” respect, which is steeped in fear. More than that, the only way out of this deception is through the loving embrace of a redemptive community that is courageous enough to set aside its own fear of death.

Thurman sees the possibility of some good news through this model. He said, “What is against life will be destroyed by life, for what is against life is against God.”⁴⁸ He goes on to say, “This is one of the important insights the Master brings out in His parable of the wheat and the tares.”⁴⁹ His point is that there is a time of growth for all vegetation. During the growth period, it is not clear what is good and what is not. In that haze of understanding, let all grow together. In the end, ultimately, the wheat will produce fruit and the tare produce tares. We must be mindful that “God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good; He causes rain to fall on the just as well as the unjust.”⁵⁰

When the community follows this model, the mechanism for survival is abandoned and instead the community embraces the power of life through the true gospel message. This is radical and redemptive behavior, which is exactly the kind of behavior the world needs to see from the people of the church. Stanley Grenz observes:

God intends to bring to pass a reconciled creation in which humans reflect in their relationship to each other and the universe around us the reality of the triune God. God’s actions are aimed at establishing the reconciled community of love as the human reflection of the social trinity—the divine nature—which is love.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁵¹ Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame Of Love* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1996), 117.

Redeeming our young, no matter how menacing they may appear, is innately right for the church to do. Alister McGrath puts it this way, “The church is not meant to be a ‘pure body’ a society of saints, but a ‘mixed body’ of saints and sinners.”⁵² McGrath continues by saying, “To attempt to separate the wheat and the weeds while both are still growing would be to court disaster, probably involving damaging the wheat while trying to get rid of the weeds.”⁵³ McGrath’s point is that in a truly redemptive environment it is necessary for both saint and sinner to exist side by side. In other words, it is necessary for the church to participate in the act of redemption, for in this way the church is reminded of its mission is the world. But engaging in the act of redemption is also necessary for the sinner—these are the young people in the mold of Tupac.

This converges into the second central nerve that Thurman hits. The church is in danger of losing its sense of moral distinctions. Because of its fear, the church continues to call a good thing bad. The profundity of Thurman’s assertion is immense! For one thing, the people of God must recover the truth of (Gen 1:26-29.) This reveals that humankind, the high point of all of creation was blessed by God with these words, “God made human beings in his image. And God said they are very good.” This truth must again be the anthem of the people in the disinherited community and especially within the black church. The church in particular, must remember that the young people who engender so much fear from society are, nonetheless, made in the image of God. More than that, the very essence of them is good, and therefore able to be redeemed. This

⁵² McGrath Alister, *Theology The Basics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 113.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 113.

reality strikes at the heart of the Kingdom message preached by Jesus. To ignore it, would mean receiving and become the thing that Thurman warned about. “The penalty of deception is to become a deception.”⁵⁴

Tony Campolo and Michael Battle offer some valuable and holistic ways the black church can practice being redemptive. They suggest that a kind of marriage occur between the mega church and the storefront church in the African-American community.⁵⁵ In this way, the mega church would be responsible for providing resources, such as pastoral and administrative training to its lesser trained counterparts.⁵⁶ In addition, the mega church should continue to help develop and strengthen the economic structure of urban community.⁵⁷ On the other hand, the storefront church would then be responsible for nurturing the sense of a connected family within the community. This would serve two purposes. First, because storefront churches are small in number, they are places where people can be known and develop respect.⁵⁸ In this regard, they become valuable to the larger community. Secondly, the storefront church can become a training ground for the businesses developed by the mega churches. This kind of cooperative effort provides economic stability, and ultimately engenders love and brings about true

⁵⁴ Ibid., 69.

⁵⁵ Tony Campolo and Michael Battle, *The Church Enslaved* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 2005), 62-66.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 64.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 65-66.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 66.

respect of individuals. Thurman conceives that this will only happen to the extent that the autonomy of the individual is not denied.⁵⁹

It should also be pointed out that the goal for many living in the larger white society is to avoid the hazard of being killed in the inner city as well. That is, the threat of experiencing an act of violence while they are helping the disadvantaged is too great for most. Therefore, instead of being physically present, many opt to send money. Others have reasoned that the issues at hand are black issues and therefore, need to be dealt with by the black community, who must learn to help themselves before they expect others to come to their aid. However, the answer to systemic poverty is never to throw money at it. Instead, we must all learn a lesson from Government programs such as welfare. These programs must serve to remind us that systems such as welfare may provide short term relief; but ultimately they lead to generations of poverty. This is the true hazard that many are being killed by in the inner city. Moreover, this kind of death should be avoided at all costs.

But what will it take to cause the larger white church to cast off its fear of being personally harmed, and participate in providing long term solutions for the plight of the disenfranchised black community? And what can be done to foster such a relationship that might lead to real social change and therefore, brotherly love?

It is doubtful that Thurman would have sought for the solutions to these questions by going to the white community in the first place. Thurman would have found his answers by “Centering down.” He was able to go far beyond his blackness and therefore, his self-limitations, and tap an otherness through mystical union with God.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 22.

The term mysticism is largely foreign to the black church. However, connecting with God is not. For example, whenever my grandmother realized that she was facing something beyond her ability, she would say, “I need to seek the Master’s face.” This precisely describes the mystical act of centering down. In addition, for the mystic Thurman says, “The judgment of God stands now where the judgment of self stood before.”⁶⁰ Today, this is what is sorely lacking among black church leaders. Rather than being quick to propose or settle for a human solution, perhaps today’s leaders should learn from the wisdom of Thurman. He sought to be in union with the mind of the Beloved rather than to lean to his own understanding in order to resolve the problems of life. Thurman’s ideals provided great benefit to all who would listen. Unfortunately, many in his day rejected him because they perceived that Thurman to be a sell-out. In 1949, Thurman was offered perhaps the most prestigious position a black theologian could hope to attain: The position of President at Morehouse College. Morehouse is of the black Baptist tradition. Instead, Thurman left Morehouse to plant a church in San Francisco, called “All Peoples United.” It was the church he conceived in his mystical visions. And it truly represented all ethnicities. However, it also prevented him from reaching his full effectiveness within the black church. Perhaps this is the place that Thurman missed an opportunity to have his most dynamic effect theologically. There is no doubt that he was able to reach out and teach other people how to transcend the limits of their own practical existence. But he perhaps missed out on being able to teach the black clergy in particular, “that the real target of evil is not the destruction of the body, or the reduction to rubble of cities or even abject poverty of the disinherited. The real target

⁶⁰ Ibid., 112

of evil is the corruption of the spirit of man, and giving his soul the contagion of inner disintegration.”⁶¹

Howard Thurman provided another valuable insight from his mystical experience. He recognized that the experience in the growth and development of the black community would largely happen in a similar way as that of a baby. Thurman says:

He discovers its separateness from others—from its mother, for instance, who stops feeding him or her sometimes even as she or he wishes the mother to continue. In some strange way, separateness and even divisibility dawn in his/her mind as a way of thinking about the world.⁶²

Thurman goes on to point out that as the baby reflects on this episode and begins to cry, he /she realizes a second thing. That is, it is the crying baby that gets the bottle and gets rocked. This is what has happened in the black community for so long. The community in general, including the black church to a great extent, has like the baby in Thurman’s illustration, learned that the louder and longer it cries, the more attention and money it will receive. However, Thurman believed that this only adds to the problem. Thurman argues that the baby needs struggle in order to thrive. He says that:

Struggling along, held almost horizontal to the floor by nature and by his own undeveloped self-consciousness, he staggers unsteadily to an upright position on his feet—miracle of miracles, there he is, suspended between the ceiling and the floor with his little feet touching, he or she stands alone. This act says I did it. In that moment of deepest awareness his/her knees give way and the floor rises up to meet him/her. But always with his/her environment the struggle goes on apace—the

⁶¹ Walter Fluker, *The Legacy of Howard Thurman: Religion & Ethics* Newsweekly, Episode 520: January 2002 [Journal on line]; available from www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week520/feature.html - 39k

⁶² Walter E. Fluker, & , Catherine Tumber, eds. *A Strange Freedom; The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious experience*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998.

struggle to achieve individuality, to discover a practical reinforcement of the self so that he/she can act as an individual, as a unit, as a whole.⁶³

There is great benefit in centering down for leader in the black church today.

Centering down will keep alive sensitivity to the movement of the spirit of God in the quietness of the human heart and in the workings of the human mind. This is perhaps Thurman's greatest contribution to the black church and humanity.

Conversely, choosing not to center down means more of the same need to depend on those in the white church, to find solutions to resolve the issues of the black community. This sort of dependence demonstrates great distrust in God. Moreover, it keeps the disenfranchised from having any stake in the social order.⁶⁴ Instead they are made to feel alien.⁶⁵ Additionally, Thurman points to the fact that the moment of supreme human dignity is reached when hypocrisy is exposed and then exchanged for sincerity.⁶⁶ In this statement, Thurman conceived of accountability through visibility. In essence, the white church must come to recognize its responsibility as a neighbor. But the black church must truly direct its focus on the Lord, and learn to stand on its own. To this end, Scott Roley and James Isaac Elliot contend that, "Neighborly care, friendship and love seem to be the essence of biblical faith."⁶⁷ In this regard, the disenfranchised lose the defense mechanism of deception and deal rightly with God. This act will further aid in

⁶³ Ibid., 112

⁶⁴ Ibid., 69.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 70.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 70.

⁶⁷ Scott Roley and Elliot James Isaac, *God's Neighborhood* (Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1984), 149.

helping the disinherited facilitate dealing rightly with man. For the relationship between man and man is the same as between God and man. When this happens, there are no more barriers between men of privilege and those who were born underprivileged. This may be costly to the extent of the loss of life, but Thurman maintains that, “There must always be the confidence that the effect of the truth can be realized in the mind of the oppressor as well as the oppressed.”⁶⁸

Hatred

In Thurman's estimation, “Hatred cannot be defined. It can only be described.”⁶⁹ As Thurman understands hatred, any model that one constructs as an absolute representative or single definition of hatred would be illogical. He envisions that hatred resembles love in this respect. That is, these are two antithetical principles. Each stands at the opposite end of the theological spectrum. On one hand, love is the guiding principle of the Kingdom of God. For example, the apostle Paul upholds the love principle in 1 Corinthians 13. There he does not define love. Rather, love is seen as a broad category, and as such the apostle underscores its virtues by extolling love's attributes throughout the chapter. On the other hand, however, hate is secure as the anchoring principle of the Kingdom of evil.

It follows then, that in order to truly gain a proper understanding of hate, one must also approach it as a broad category that possesses many facets. The work of Emerson and Smith is us quite useful here. They do not attempt to directly pin point hate, but they do examine what they have termed to be, “social cleavages.” Chief among these

⁶⁸ Ibid., 71.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 75

cleavages is race in North America. Emerson and Smith demonstrate how race can function as a tentacle of hate. It should be pointed out however, that not every incident involving race should be labeled as prejudice, racism or hate. For example, Emerson relates an experience he had while he was conducting his research. He called to interview Chantel Adams. A man answered the phone, which Emerson supposed was Chantel's husband. The man then yelled, "Chantel, telephone." She responded, "who is it?" Then the man quickly cupped his hand over the phone. He was not expecting that Emerson would hear the next thing he was about to say. He replied to Chantel, "I don't know, it's some white guy!" Was this an act of racism? Or was the prejudice of a man, being revealed that day? Emerson suggests that neither is necessarily the case. Nor is it automatically true that it was bigotry that motivated a neighbor to comment that, he lives next door to the black family. Rather, in North America we must come to understand that we live in a racially charged or "racialized society." Therefore, race carries significant meaning in our interaction with each other. Emerson and Smith suggest that:

A racialized society is a society wherein race matters profoundly for differences in lifestyle experiences, life opportunities, and social relationships. A racialized society can also be said to be a society that allocates differential economic, political, social and even psychological rewards to groups along racial lines; that are socially constructed.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided By Faith*: (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7

While Emerson and Smith obviously raise valid points, it should not be lost that what one recognizes to be an innocent comment within a specific social construct, can also become the opportunity for prejudice, racism and hate to develop toward another. Hate then, must begin as a seed. As it is true about love, hate must also be nurtured and afforded an opportunity to grow. However, the result of its seeds is the mature fruit of the Kingdom of evil. The racialized society in my estimation is a prime candidate to develop huge blind spots. For what one permits as being innocent, if left unchecked, can become his/her blind spot. Perhaps the blind spots of the white community are exactly what some people of color have identified, and used to argue that Christianity is a white man's religion? If this is the case, we find a very important rubric at work. That is, the potential for an antithetical duality exists in each of us.

Simultaneously, the visible attributes of the Kingdom of God and the visible attributes of the Kingdom of Evil coexist. The parable of the tares among wheat provides evidence of this reality. Jesus told this parable to his disciples in (Matthew 13:24-30). There are three striking developments within this story that may help to explain why the seeds of hatred present such a danger within the community of faith.

Verses 25-26 reveal the presence of an enemy. This enemy had come and spoiled what was initially good. We also observe that the enemy went about wreaking havoc while the people slept. The act of sleeping suggests being unaware or caught off guard. Furthermore, Jesus gives no indication in the parable, that there was anything that the people could have done to prevent the enemy from commingling the seeds together.

Secondly, we learn that when the seeds matured, the presence of the tares were not apparent until after the wheat had produced its grain. We are later informed that,

“then the tares became evident.” One observes here that without divine aid it is nearly impossible for humanity to truly discern what is innocent and what ultimately poses a danger to the community of faith.

Finally, the instructions of the land owner was to his servants was to allow the tares and the wheat to grow together. It is implied in the text, that humankind is not capable of accurately discerning the difference between wheat and tares. Furthermore, the parable rightly suggests, it is only after the maturity of the crop, that human eyes were able perceive that something had gone askew.

Could the lack of spiritual discernment in our “racialized society” be one, if not the primary reason for the lack of brother love? Has it also been responsible for the ripening harvest of hatred toward one another?

One could attempt to build a case in either direction. Thurman however, would suggest that such an attempt in either direction would mean the construction of a model that seeks a single answer or remedy for hate. Therefore, Thurman would reject such pursuits, because for him hate is a broad category, which is too vast for a single definition. This kind of pursuit for Thurman is futile and illogical.

Instead, Thurman holds that a more productive pursuit would be the pursuit of “disinterested service.” He defines this service as, “a kind of service that has no narrow ulterior motive at work, a kind of service in which the person served is not a means to some end in which he or she does not share and participate directly.”

It should be stated plainly, that Thurman does not foresee the eradication of hate through disinterested service. Rather, disinterested service provides an avenue through which the affirmation mystic can pursue social change. This pursuit takes place in the

midst of a society that is held in tension by the simultaneous existence of the Kingdom of God and its visible attributes, against the Kingdom of Evil and the fruit it manifests.

Thurman argues:

The affirmation mystic is not interested in social action because of any particular political or economic theory; he or she is not interested in social action primarily from the point of view of humanitarian or humanism—as important as these emphases are, but she or he is interested in social action because society as he or she knows it to be, ensnares the human spirit in a maze of particulars so that the One cannot be sensed nor the good realized. She or he is not deluded into thinking that once men are freed from carking care, from anxiety due to poverty or riches, from misery due to greed and exploitation, they will automatically be in immediate candidacy for the perfectionism of the spirit. He or she sees however, that with these situations relieved there is available a psychological climate in which people can ascend the mount of vision with freedom and abandonment.⁷¹

The route that Thurman pursues is an important one for us to consider today for at least two reasons. First, it is clear that no single individual can ever expect to be the conduit that will bring about the eradication of hate in this world. Nor can the people of God expect to live in perfection, until the Lord returns. However, Thurman's mystical pursuit of social change in the individual provides hope that persons can affect change in their immediate sphere of influence, as each is brought into the awareness that it is possible her or him to ascend the mount of vision and have fellowship with the One.

Secondly, the role of the affirmation mystic as Thurman has outlined it is to provide a diastolic, systolic service to the people of faith. She or he oscillates between the natural and the spiritual realm helping to encourage the flow of spiritual blood from the heart of God into the lungs of humankind. Thus the people of God receive the fresh oxygen necessary to provide a higher quality of life. In this sense, the Affirmation mystic

⁷¹ Ibid., 120

assumes the role of the prophetic voice. In my opinion, this voice is missing in our society today.

Love

Thurman concluded that the love of Christ is the element that will bring about healing, wholeness, and unity not only to Christians, but to the entire world. As Thurman saw it, before love can be achieved, however, one must reckon with the three hounds of hell: fear, deception and hatred. In Thurman's estimation, it is only after dealing with these three elements that one is truly prepared to do the necessary work of learning to love her/his brother.

To that end, Thurman clarifies how this ethic of love is initiated. He directly links the successful practice of this theology to one's ability to obey the commandments of Christ, and therefore God. He posits:

It seems clear that Jesus started out with the simple teaching concerning love embodied in the timeless words of Israel. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might," and "thy neighbor as thyself." Once the neighbor is defined then one's moral obligation is clear.⁷²

As we consider Thurman's optimistic view of how the love of Christ is appropriated in our minds, Walter Rauschenbusch wonders, "Have we enough faith to believe that the doctrine of love is the solution of our big modern questions?"⁷³ He

⁷² Howard Thurman, *Jesus And The Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1944), 89.

⁷³ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Dare We Be Christians?* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1993), 16.

further queried, “Do we dare to assert the futility of everything in our great world of commerce and industry that leaves love out?”⁷⁴ Rauschenbusch concludes finally that:

We need a modern supplement to Paul’s praise of love, written in the face of present-day problems and with a twentieth-century point of view, but with the same Christian enthusiasm for love and the same old faith in the power of Jesus Christ to inspire love.⁷⁵

While it may appear that Rauschenbush and Thurman are seeing the love ethic from differing points of view, they are not. Their confluence becomes clear as one reflects on Thurman’s concept of disinterested service. There Thurman’s affirmation mystic provides the model that Rauschenbusch yearns for. Thus the two stand in complete agreement.

That this is true is apparent based on what Paul wrote about love in 1 Corinthians 13. Paul views the essence of love as being selfless and concerned with the interests of one’s neighbor. For instance, Paul writes:

Love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 1Cor. 13:4-7 NASB.

It would seem then that Dr. Rauschenbusch was right in calling for a modern-day supplement to Paul’s praise of love. And that is exactly what Howard Thurman delivered with his twentieth-century theology of brotherly love.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 17.

At the very heart of Thurman's theology, he maintains that through love the two primary barriers that God's people need to confront will be overcome.

Jesus suggested that the first barrier his people must confront is the barrier of learning to love one's neighbor. That is to say, that one will appropriate the God-given ability to love when one wills her/himself to respond to human need despite another's class, race, or personal condition. To use Thurman's words, "Every man is potentially every other man's neighbor."⁷⁶ Additionally, one can think of a neighbor as one who is a member of the community of faith. Thurman skillfully uses the story of the Syrophenican woman to illustrate his point. In this story, Jesus is confronted with a dilemma. As he and his disciple entered the region of Tyre and Sidon, a Canaanite woman confronted him with her problem. Her daughter was grievously vexed with a demon. When Jesus heard this, he refused to answer her. She persisted. The disciples wanted to send her away because of the commotion she started by shouting after Jesus.

The woman shouted, "Lord help me!" Then Jesus said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Undaunted, the woman cried out again. This time, Jesus told her, "It's not good to give the children's bread to the dogs." Matt. 15:21-28 NASB. The persistence of the woman affected Jesus in such a way that it caused him to ultimately grant the woman's request. Instantly, the woman's daughter was healed. Thurman remarked that, "Jesus felt that he was merely serving as a creative vehicle for the authentic genius of Israel, completely devoted to the will of God, then in

⁷⁶ Ibid., 89.

order to love those of the household he must conquer his own pride.”⁷⁷ That Jesus would have to conquer pride seems to be an astonishing revelation. Yet, for the child of God, obediently assaulting one’s pride is exactly what is necessary to reach the levels of love required to catch the attention of a world that is love starved.

In this regard, Thurman would be proud of the example that Pastor Overstreet has set in North Portland. Pastor Mary Overstreet, of Powerhouse Temple Church in North Portland, stands in agreement with Thurman based on her actions as a result of witnessing the suffering of many of the helpless poor in the Gulf-Coast region. In the spirit of, “If you want something done do it yourself,” Pastor Overstreet, with help from family members in the Gulf Coast area, evacuated a group of survivors herself.

Pastor Overstreet cashed in two certificates of deposit and sold her Arizona vacation home to pay rent and utilities on Portland apartments for these new community members. “They are broke, homeless, disturbed and need something to get them back on their feet.” Pastor Overstreet said. “Why give them a cot when I can give them a key?”

I asked Pastor Overstreet what was behind this spirit of altruism. She responded, “It is Obedience to the Lord’s command to love my neighbor!” She also said, “I’ll willingly sacrifice for that, at all costs.”

This is what Pinnock and Brow meant when they said, “Salvation empowers our life and liberates us from all kinds of bondage.”⁷⁸ They go on to say that, “Because we

⁷⁷ Ibid., 90.

⁷⁸ Clark H. Pinnock & Robert C. Brow, *Unbounded Love* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 113.

are secure in God, we are set free to serve and free to risk.”⁷⁹ Moreover, it is the essence of what Wesley intended when he said, “There is no holiness but social holiness.”

In order for the people of God to realize Thurman’s theology of brotherly love in earnest, a second hurdle must be dealt with. This is, the hurdle of learning how to love our enemies. Simply put, for Thurman this is an act of the will. Specifically, Thurman identifies this act of the will as, “The attitude of respect for personality.” Thurman adds that this brand of love demands no less than stripping bare all pretense (status) and false pride. As an example, Dr. Thurman offers that:

During the great Davenport, Oregon, disaster, when rising waters left thousands homeless, many people of Portland who, prior to that time were sure of their “white supremacy,” opened their homes to Negroes, Mexicans, and Japanese. The result was that they were all confronted with the experience of universality. They were no longer white, black, and brown. They were men, women, and children in the presence of the operation of impersonal Nature. Under the pressure, they were the human family, and each stood in the immediate candidacy for the profoundest fellowship, understanding, and love.⁸⁰

This concept of reverence of personality is highlighted whenever there is an instance where the heavy weight of status has been sloughed off. Then each person can meet the other where he/she is and treat her/him as if they are where they ought to be. As Thurman points out, this is exactly what Jesus did with the woman who was caught in the act of adultery. The woman was caught red –handed, and according to the law she was to be put to death. This searching question was brought to Jesus. “What do you say?” Thurman observes that, “To them the woman was not a woman or even a person, but an

⁷⁹ Ibid., 113.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 104.

adulteress, stripped of her essential dignity and worth.”⁸¹ But Jesus replied, “You without sin cast the first stone.” Thurman maintains that:

The quiet words exploded the situation, and in the piercing glare each man saw himself in his literal substance. In that moment each was not a judge of another’s deeds, but his own. In the same glare the adulteress saw herself merely as a woman involved in the meshes of a struggle with her own elemental passion.⁸²

Jesus met the woman where she was, and he treated her as if she were already where she desired to be. In sum, reverence of personality is love for human kind, simply because people are made in the image of God.

Howard Thurman wasn’t the only one to understand the concept of the reverence of personality. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. also expressed a similar thought in his message based on Psalm 8. In sum, King relates that several scientists estimated that if one calculated what a man was worth it would total about 98 cents in their day. King concluded that in his time, given inflation, a man might be worth \$1.98. He later pointed out that thankfully man’s worth doesn’t stop there. King believed, “There is something within a man that cannot be explained in terms of dollars and cents.”⁸³

Even if a man has been imprisoned, “His mind would somehow break out through the bars to scratch across the pages of history a Pilgrim’s Progress.”⁸⁴ What this demonstrates is that man is not merely matter, but man is also spirit. King also rightly

⁸¹ Ibid., 105.

⁸² Ibid., 105.

⁸³ Martin Luther King, *The Measure Of A Man* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1998), 16.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 17.

suggests that man is a sinner who is in need of a savior. Dr. King's final observation is that for all man is worth, man is redeemable.

Restoring humanity to the image of God is the role of the potent messiah that Howard Thurman discovered in Jesus. Jesus accomplishes this task through the cooperation of people who respond to the call of the gospel message and accept the reign of His Kingdom in their lives.

Furthermore, the love of Christ transforms God's people, but it also brings about healing, wholeness and unity to the entire world. While the world has not yet fully experienced this love in its brightest manifestation, Howard Thurman has provided substantial proof that brotherly love is possible.

CONCLUSION

For many years, the absence of social equality and the lack of brotherly love have been major problems among Christians. In fact, some privileged white people have concluded that God has granted them exclusive, providential rights. The example of John Saffin who circulated a pro-slavery pamphlet in rebuttal of earlier anti-slavery literature published by Superior Court Judge Samuel Sewell prove that he and others like him have taken the words "subdue the earth" quite literally.

Additionally, it has also been historically demonstrated that many Western European whites have gone into several countries with promises of making life better through Jesus, only to deliver a considerably different gospel and way of life than what had been promised.

Encounters of this sort have given people of color such as Thiong'o Ngugi cause to find disagreement with Howard Thurman's belief in a potent and affirming Messiah. Based on the encounters that Ngugi has had with Imperialistic minded Western European whites, he has good reason to believe that the lack of brotherly love among human beings is the result of white people not showing themselves to be brotherly to people of color.

While some might argue that Ngugi is bitter, one could pose a second argument. Namely, that Ngugi is no bitterer than a person of Jewish decent would be about the Holocaust.

Howard Thurman was familiar with struggle and inequity. Not only was he a product of the Deep South, he lived during the time of the Jim Crow laws. Thurman himself a very dark skinned black man, who experienced first hand, the vilest forms of prejudice, not only from whites, but surprisingly even from some blacks of fairer complexion.

Thurman witnessed some of the painful struggle that took place among people of color in India. He was deeply disturbed by how Indians had to lose their sense of being Indian, in order to become Christian. Moreover, Thurman was well acquainted with the inequities that had occurred with the people of color globally.

Perhaps the greatest struggle of Howard Thurman's life came as a result of an accusation leveled at him by an Indian barrister in 1935. He alleged that as an oppressed black man, Thurman's Christianity made him "the biggest traitor to all people of color." Thurman was rocked by this assessment. Consequently, this incident forced him into a battle to resolve two questions. Were Jesus and the Christian message valid for those who

live with their backs against the wall? Or was Christianity positively a religion that favored the white man?

Thurman emerged from this struggle empowered by a new understanding. He was able to resolve that oppressors make Christianity appear to be in desperate opposition to the oppressed. Therefore, Jesus never intended that Christianity be a religion for the powerful and dominant. Moreover, Christianity does not solely belong to any man. In fact, Christianity belongs to the Kingdom of God, and those who are citizens in it.

This was a most important realization. For one thing, being empowered with the knowledge that God is not a white racist, confirmed what he suspected to be true all along. That God recognizes each person equally as members of the human experience. In addition, he became more certain that there was a specific cause behind all aberrant behavior among those professing to be citizens of the Kingdom; but who display behavior that would place them alongside those who reside in the Kingdom of Evil. To this end, Howard Thurman reasoned that the ugly dialectic that he had observed was the result of the seeds of hate. Thurman's observations about hate are not only insightful but they are startling to consider.

Thurman was able to conceptualize how Christians living in a larger society may not have community in common at all. That is, even though all are united in brother and sisterhood, each is divided by what is different among them. This discovery led to two powerful questions. First, Thurman asked, "What do we mean when we teach brotherhood?" Then he wondered, "Can we expect more from the state, of the body politic, of industry than we expect from the Church? He found that the answers to both of these questions could only properly be addressed by Kingdom of God theology. Kingdom

of God theology served to ground Thurman in the true concept of righteous community. Strangely enough, this grounding came as he sought to understand the relationship between Jesus and the gospels and the writings of the Apostle Paul. He was quick to recognize that Jesus was to be counted among the disenfranchised of the world, which meant that he possessed second class citizenship in Palestine. However, he also observed that Jesus simultaneously held a higher citizenship in the Kingdom of God. This reality stood as a model for Thurman as it related to the disinherited. As for the Apostle Paul, Thurman saw him as a dual citizen of the Kingdom, too. Except, Thurman held that Paul, and other whites had enjoyed a kind of privileged citizenship on earth, as well.

Ultimately, Thurman concluded that what was of the uppermost importance for the people of faith to maintain was a reverent attitude about one's citizenship, in both the earthly and the heavenly realms. For this attitude embodies the anchoring philosophy of a righteous community. This is a very useful concept for citizens of the Kingdom in all generations. Perhaps the human desire for world peace is contained within this one pearl of wisdom that Thurman identified.

Thurman's spiritual breakthrough came when he combined the Gandhian concept of non violent resistance with mysticism. He accepted the Gandhian concept after his pilgrimage to India. However, his association with mysticism not only helped to change his life, but it also became the primary stone of his theology. Through mysticism Thurman gained the depth of relationship to God that he had so desperately sought. It was a rather unlikely pairing at the beginning. This is because Thurman's religious foundation issued from the black Baptist church. The black church was not aware of mysticism and would have certainly been wary of it at the time. In fact, it was. Thurman was viewed by

some to have been an odd ball. Nevertheless, his ascetic visions from God provided him with insights about social conditions and how the people of God could thrive despite any spiritual dualities or temporal realities that they face. Thurman's findings are still valid today. His concept of affirmation mysticism leading to social change is as portable today as it was when he conceived it. By seeking union with the mind of the Beloved rather than finding succor in human reason, we may find that many of the solution that we desperately seek in order to resolve some of the issues in the inner city, are ours through divine revelation.

The nagging frustration with Thurman is that for all of his marvelous insights, spiritual acumen and personal depth, he is a relative unknown today. There are two reasons in my opinion for this tragedy. First, Thurman's great desire to intimately understand what it would be like to experience a Christian community in which all people were truly embraced, compelled him to plant a Church bearing that name in San Francisco California. The church was a success and grew. Thurman gained much notoriety for successfully taking on and accomplishing an endeavor of this magnitude but he only stayed there for a few years.

Was this an ego boost for Thurman? Perhaps this is true, but not likely the case. Fluker has said that Thurman was a man without a huge ego. Perhaps this also contributes to why Thurman remains so little known?

I surmise that the fundamental reason that Howard Thurman is hardly known and his theology of brotherly love has been obscured rests in what was his greatest opportunity, and yet became his biggest blunder. In 1949, Thurman was offered the position to be President of Morehouse College. At the time, Morehouse was the most

prestigious black college in America. Instead of accepting that position, Thurman planted the All Peoples Church. The reason I believe that this was a mistake, is that Morehouse was also the training ground for black Baptist clergy and therefore, some of the brightest minds available. These young men were well acquainted with Howard Thurman. In fact, one of these young men who came along several years after Thurman left Morehouse and the All Peoples church to become a the first black dean at Boston University, was Martin Luther King Jr. Thurman became his mentor. And as Thurman's protégé King took Thurman's theology of brotherly love to the ends of the world. Armed with mysticism and the love of God, King proved in reality what Thurman knew largely in theory. One can only wonder what might have become of mysticism and Thurman's theology of brotherly love had he stayed at Morehouse.

The legacy of Howard Thurman will not die however. Today, Walter Fluker and Cathrerine Tumber are the primary bearers of Thurman's torch. Through them, a smattering of others, including myself, affirmation mysticism and the love for humankind will live on.

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